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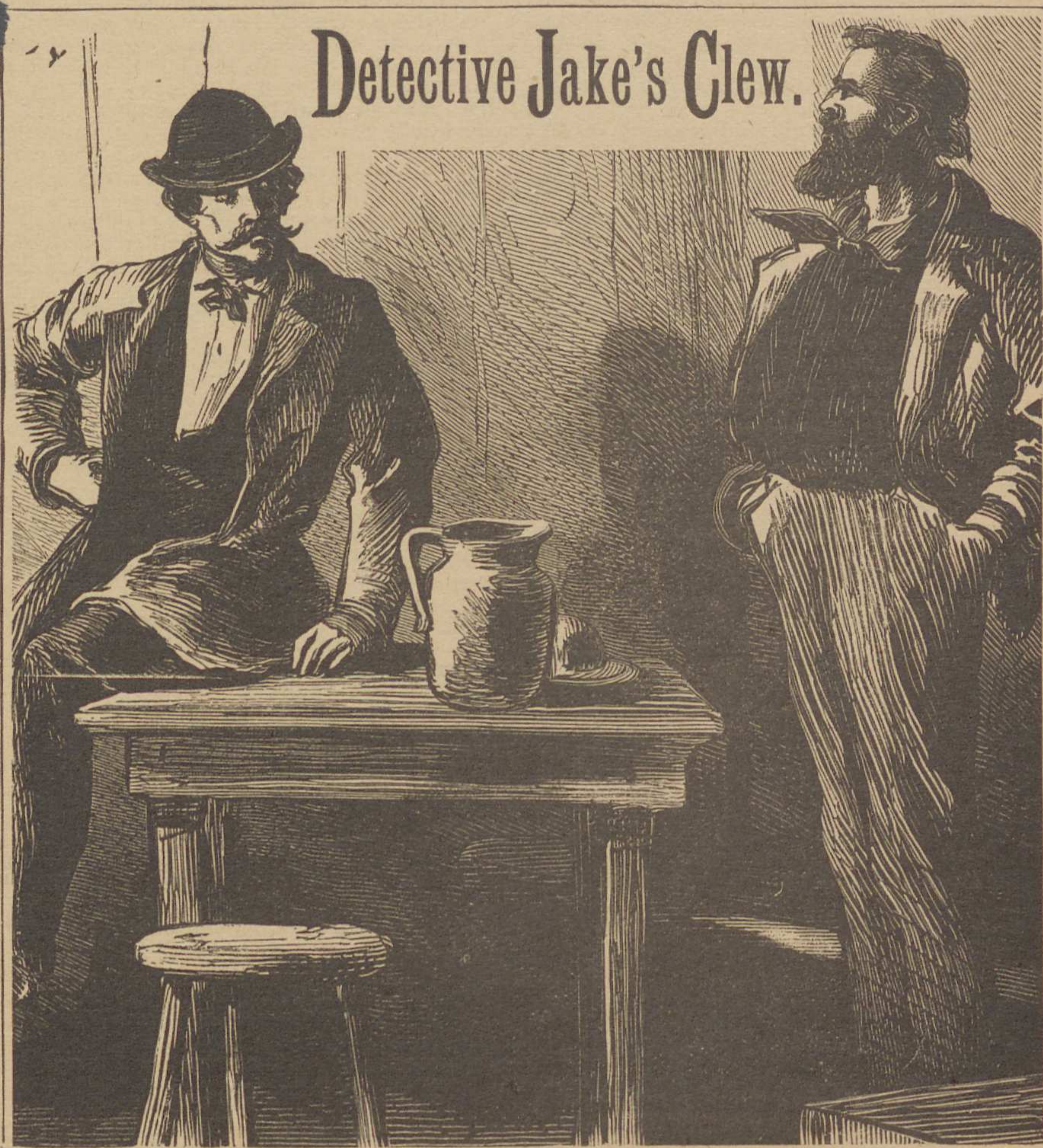
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Detective Jake's Clew;

OR,

THE BOY VIGILANTES.

BY MAJ. H. B. STODDARD, Ex Scout,
AUTHOR OF "NECK-TIE NED," "PONY, THE
COW-BOY," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

AN INTERRUPTED TOAST.

"THE NUGGET," rum-shop and gambling den in the frontier mining camp of Paydirt, was crowded to its utmost capacity on the 4th day of July, A. D. 1879, and it was as much as the white-aproned barkeepers could do to fill the orders which poured in thick and fast.

It was an utter impossibility to get anywhere near the faro, monte, roulette or chuck-a-luck games which were going on in an adjoining room; or to enter the keno room, still further on, at all.

There was a variety of games suited to all tastes and all purses, for "The Nugget" catered to all, and everything was grist that came to its mill.

And a curious-looking grist it was—rough, unkempt miners, rougher, more unkempt teamsters, rubbed elbows with white-shirted, jewel-decked gamblers from Chicago and St. Louis; while side by side with the one-eye-glassed English swell stood the latest importation from the Bowery.

Seated on an upturned beer-keg in one corner of the room—for "keg-beer" was a specialty at "The Nugget"—gazing at the crowd with a mingled expression of interest and disgust—interest when a movement near the door indicated a new arrival; disgust all the time—sat a lad of apparently seventeen years, dressed in a mixture of frontier and civilized clothes that rendered it difficult to determine exactly what he was.

His shirt—he wore no coat nor vest—was of the finest linen, made with a broad, turn-down collar, from under which fell the ends of a bright crimson scarf.

His nether garments were of buckskin, and he wore high, tight-fitting boots, which reached well over the knee; while a broad-brimmed *sombrero* of the purest white completed his costume.

In the belt which was strapped around his waist, were two ivory-handled revolvers; while in a sheath sewed onto the leg of his right boot was a heavy hunting-knife.

His smooth, boyish face contrasted strangely with his warlike appearance, which was heightened, as he leaned forward from time to time, by the sight of an octagon-barreled Winchester rifle, leaning in the corner behind him.

The silver band on his hat, the immense silver spurs he wore, a silver chain around his neck, the ends of which were tucked into the bosom of his shirt, all tended to render his costume still more picturesque, and to make him noticeable wherever he went.

He seemed to know no one; at least he interchanged no greetings, and if any of the ruder class, thinking that his girlish appearance warranted them in making him the subject of their jests, approached with that intention, they invariably changed their minds before putting their ideas into execution.

The boy never, on such occasions, shifted his position; but his hand dropped carelessly onto his revolver, and as he fixed his eyes on the intruder, there was an expression in them which boded no good to any one who should insult him.

"'Restless Jake' by George!" (or by somebody stronger), they invariably muttered, as they withdrew more rapidly than they had approached, keeping one eye over their shoulders as they did so.

For the fame of "Restless Jake" had spread far and wide, and although he had never before visited this section of Colorado, his peculiarity of dress was known, and when, coupled with this, came the ever-ready movement of the hand to the pistol, his identity was quickly and fully established, and the toughest customer there would have quailed before the boy ranger.

The fun waxed fast and furious; the glasses clinked louder and louder; the atmosphere of the saloon became more and more dense with tobacco smoke; voices grew shriller and higher, while oaths flew thick and wild, and still the boy sat—waiting.

It was nearing midnight, and nothing of incident had occurred, when as the crowd near the door had thinned for an instant, it was flung wide open, and a tall, swarthy, evil-eyed miner—at least he was dressed in the rough dress of a prospector—elbowed his way to the bar, followed by a dozen or more men equally as villainous looking, and called for liquor for the party.

At the leader's entrance, the boy had started as if stung by an electric shock, and straightening up in his uncomfortable seat, quietly and unperceived by any one, drew one of his revolvers.

The glasses filled, the leader turned to his followers, and raising the liquor high in the air, sung out:

"Well, boys, here's to the Cap—" crack! went the pistol, and the glass flew into a thousand pieces, while as one man the occupants of the room turned to see what was up.

Jerking at the silver chain about his neck, Jake drew from his bosom a small whistle, and leaping onto the keg, and leveling both of his revolvers at the band, who still stood with their liquor undrank, looking in amazement at the beardless stripling who thus dared brave them, blew a shrill blast, and cried:

"I fired that shot!" and his voice rung high above the din and uproar. "Who dares dispute the act with me?"

And finger on trigger, his eyes flashing fire, he stood there, defying the mob of desperadoes, and waiting for a reply.

For an instant none came.

CHAPTER II.

THE ESCAPE.

THE gang of ruffians did not, however, remain long quiescent under the lash of this insult laid on them through their leader.

Momentarily paralyzed as they had been by the audacity of the lad, they soon recovered, and, as one man, drew revolver and knife, and leveled and raised them to let out the blood from the young heart which seemed almost criminally reckless in its bravery.

But even in times of the greatest peril the boy was as cool, as calm and collected as when all was quiet in his vicinity; and to this characteristic was largely due his many escapes from what seemed at the time almost certain death.

He never acted without deliberation, and, while waiting for the moment of action, matured his plans perfectly; the consequence being that he never was taken unawares.

His intuition seemed marvelous; but was merely owing to his having adopted the rule, "In time of peace prepare for war."

As the howling band advanced toward him his revolvers flashed in their very faces, stunning and blinding and confusing them, for the reports came so quickly that his enemies had been allowed no time to cock their weapons.

With such an instantaneous movement that the backward motion of his body seemed the recoil from his pistols, he sprung, turning in the air, through a small window which he, standing, had partially obscured.

As he leaped, his hand grasped his Winchester rifle, while his revolver, dropping from his grasp, hung suspended from his belt by a buckskin thong, and swung loosely at his side.

As he crashed through sash and glass, a dozen reports rung out on the air, but he reached the ground outside unscathed.

Waiting for him and greeting his arrival with a glad neigh of welcome, stood his horse, which, recognizing the piercing shriek of its master's whistle, had galloped rapidly in the direction of the sound from the shadow where he had been left.

To swing into the saddle was the work of an instant, and taking the grass at the side of the road, he hurried rapidly down the main street of the town until he came to a spot where a heavy growth of bushes at the left cast deep and mysterious shadows.

Here he dismounted, and loosely fastening the lines to the saddle-horn, gave his horse a slight caress, and, with a whisper, pointed down the road.

The motion was quickly understood and immediately obeyed by the intelligent animal, and he trotted off quickly and quietly, soon disappearing around a bend in the road.

Casting a hasty glance up the street in the direction whence he had come, the boy, smiling slightly as he listened to the confused murmur of oaths and yells and angry execrations from the pursuing mob, turned and, parting the bushes, plunged headlong into the undergrowth which closed behind him and left no trace of his disappearance.

In a few moments the surging crowd which pursued him came tearing down the street.

some on foot, others mounted; but all impelled by the one common motive: to trap the beardless stripling who had dared to defy them and wash out, with his blood, the insult he had offered.

As the crowd turned down the road where the horse had disappeared, one of the men, stepping on a loose stone, uttered an exclamation and fell heavily to the ground, where he lay, groaning.

The crowd swept on and left him.

CHAPTER III.

THE BITER BIT.

THE road was soon quiet and the man who had fallen, suffering evidently from a sprained ankle, lay there, muttering and groaning and rubbing his leg in hopes of reducing the pain and preventing swelling.

But his efforts were not long continued.

As the minutes rolled by and no interloper appeared, he gradually ceased his attention to his foot and began to move, an inch at a time, toward the undergrowth at the side of the road.

His course led him in the direction which Jake had taken and his further progress was soon barred by the interlacing boughs of the bushes.

Apparently at fault, and on hands and knees, he continued his search for the passage where the boy had disappeared, but finally seemed on the point of abandoning his quest when he met with a rude interruption.

Dropping apparently from the clouds a human figure landed lightly on the earth, stooping over him and enforcing silence by pressing the cold muzzle of a revolver to the sensitive skin just behind his ear.

The under dog in the fight was completely at the mercy of the upper one it seemed, and any defense seemed useless, if not impossible; but the darkness favored the stranger, and being as accustomed to tight places as a duck to the water, his hesitation was due only to his waiting for an opportunity.

It soon came.

The unwelcome visitor, pressing a little less hard against the neck of the other, in a gruff whisper ordered him to "Get up out o' that!"—a command which was quickly obeyed.

But as the man rose from his stooping posture, he, while in the act of straightening his back, turned, and either by the most marvelous luck, or because he had eyes that saw as well at night as during the day, grasped the revolver that threatened him just back of the cylinder.

With a deep and hearty curse the other pulled the trigger, and the hammer descended.

But not on the cartridge.

The hand of his opponent received the full force of the blow, while, as if unconscious of any pain or injury, he wrenched the weapon from the grasp of the man who held it, and with heel in his calf, gave him a push that sent him crashing to the ground.

Before he could move the other was on him, and clutching him by the two arms held him fast.

Their positions were exactly reversed.

From some mysterious recess the victor in this hand-to-hand struggle produced a pair of "darbies," or steel hand-cuffs, and snapped them on the wrists of his prisoner with a facility which showed perfect familiarity with their use.

A short strap was bound about the man's legs, and then, dragging him close to a tree, the mysterious stranger made him perfectly secure by fastening about his neck an iron collar, from which depended a short chain.

To the other end of this chain was fastened a similar circle of steel, and this was clasped around the trunk of a small tree near by, the two collars being fastened with spring padlocks.

He then coolly placed his hand inside the shirt worn by the other, and thence produced a leather wallet which appeared to contain some papers of importance, judging from the expression which flitted over the face of the captive man.

The other, then, leaning over him and whispering close to his ear said:

"When whisky's in, sense is out, my lad, and you've given the whole snap dead away. Lie you there and when I see Jake, I think that he will have a word or two to say to you; what do you think? Ta-ta," and guiding himself by the marks of the struggle which had just taken place, he plunged into the bushes.

Following an uncertain trail through the woods for some distance, he at length stopped, and seating himself at the base of a huge pine, took from his pocket a small flask which, on his removing the cork, gave out a soft light, dim, but sufficiently clear, to enable him to decipher the contents of the papers he had taken.

As he read an expression of satisfaction overspread his face until, at length, he came to the last of the lot which puzzled him so that, after turning it in all directions and endeavoring to make some sense out of it, he uttered an expression of disgust and, folding up the documents, placed them carefully away and rising, prepared to follow the trail.

At this moment a shot rung through the forest, and he, staggering forward a few paces, threw his arms high in the air and fell prone on his face, shot through and through the body, while the skulking figure of a man rapidly approached and, turning the lifeless form over on its face, proceeded to rifle his pockets.

He had just extracted the wallet when a stern voice, emphasized by the sharp click, click as a rifle was cocked, ordered, "Throw up your hands!"

Turning, the assassin saw Jake, with rifle at shoulder, covering him dead, not ten paces off.

Up went his hands and with a grin meant to be sycophantic he answered:

"All right, Cap. Don't shoot, you know who it is."

And he, as if taking it for granted that it was "all right" advanced a step toward the boy.

"One step more and I fire," cried the boy, and with a stern look settling over his features he leveled the rifle and glanced along the barrel.

CHAPTER IV.

THE WOLVES AND THE LAMB.

ON the south shore of Long Island, far from any other habitation, stands a cabin, which, raised on stilts as it were, is completely surrounded by water at high-tide, while at low-water the ground around is swampy and marshy.

The only way by which it can be reached is in a row-boat, a narrow channel leading from the bay right up to the house.

At half-low or high-water, any one not familiar with the topography of the country would find considerable difficulty in reaching the cabin, for the channel once left, a boat would surely ground in the mud on either side.

It was a place of forbidding aspect and one which possessed an unsavory reputation, for stories were told about it which, if not more than half-true, would blast it forever.

In its physical aspect, too, the place was one calculated to repel the visitor.

Standing as it did high on the spiles which were driven into the mud and ooze beneath to make its foundation, it seemed like some huge crawling thing raised high on its legs on the lookout for prey.

Great masses of sea-weed clung to the uprights and dripped with the moisture they retained from the retreating tide, while there was a sickening smell which clung to and enveloped everything about in a graveyard odor that was disgusting in its dankness.

Neither door nor window was visible on any side and there was apparently no means of entrance or exit—the place seemed totally deserted.

For what purpose it had been built, the memory of the oldest inhabitant failed to recall and the name or occupation of the present inmate was as totally buried in obscurity as was the origin of the mysterious cabin.

For that it had an inmate was certain from the fact that just now, raising what appeared to be a sort of a trap in the roof, the head and shoulders of a man appeared, and he, letting the trap fall with a dull thud, sheltering his eyes from the beating sun, gazed long and earnestly seaward.

That his observations were unattended with success, was evident from the scowl that settled over his not very prepossessing features as he turned and descended the steep ladder that led from the roof, closing the door after him.

To us is, however, given the power to investigate the interior as fully as if the walls were dropped and nothing kept out the light of day.

Seated in the middle of the single room that constituted the house, was a young and handsome man, apparently thirty to thirty-five years of age.

He was busily engaged at a table with pen and paper, and, as the other descended, half-turned, with an interrogative:

"Well?"

"No signs of him yet. I'm afraid the girl may have missed the way; the fog hung heavy and thick this morning."

"Patience, my dear Job," laughed the other. "Anxiety in your case has lengthened minutes

into hours, and you fear that all may miscarry. Take things easy, my dear fellow, and try to raise your spirits by a nip o' this."

The invitation was not refused, and in a few moments the man known as Job seemed to have recovered his spirits, for he turned to his companion, and in a brisker tone than he had yet assumed, asked:

"Say, Cap, any objection to telling us your plans? I could work quicker and easier when the girl comes if I knew what was expected: an' you know you can trust me."

"Certainly, I know it, and for the best of reasons. You are well aware that a bullet would reward your treachery, before the latter could bear fruit. And it is well that you should remember it."

"Recollect, if anything should happen to me, an oath binds you, and if you break its provisions, some of the band will avenge me; and, you know, vengeance in this case means *death*, and, you also know, of what a nature."

There was a meaning in these words, as could plainly be seen in the shudder which ran over the other's frame, and he quickly interrupted:

"But as to the girl, captain. What must be done with her?"

"Whatever I tell you at the time," curtly came the answer from his leader's lips. "Enough of questioning. Draw here and look at this map, and listen well to what I tell you, for it is most important."

It was a place well adapted to the foul plot that was now being hatched out of the brains of the two villains who now occupied it.

Their low tones and the wash, wash, wash of the tide, as it slowly rose and lapped against the spiles below, were the only sounds heard, and for some time this almost unbroken silence continued. Then suddenly there came a thump on the floor almost at the feet of the two conspirators, and with a single bound they stood erect.

The single rap was quickly followed by a second, and then by two close together, and with a look of intelligence Job, stooping, lifted a trap-door in the floor, and then stepping to the wall, brought a pair of steps, which he lowered and fastened by the hooks placed in the beam, the captain, as he was called, having in the mean time looked down and proclaimed that all was right.

"Come down, Job, and give me a lift. I believe the girl has fainted," said a harsh voice below, and Job, descending the steps, proceeded to aid as he was told.

Lazily rocking on the ripples was a row-boat, in the stern sheets of which lay the inanimate form of a young girl, who, pale as she was, yet seemed the incarnation of a poet's dream, so lovely was she.

But little impressed by her beauty, Job, stooping, lifted her roughly, and scarce staggering under the load, ascended the ladder, sneering at the other, whose strength was not sufficient to do what he did.

A gleam of hate shone for a moment in the other's eye, yet was quickly suppressed as he, in turn, having fastened the boat securely, ascended the steps and dropped the trap, the ladder being first drawn up.

The lamb was in the clutches of the wolves!

CHAPTER V.

A MYSTERIOUS DOCUMENT.

THERE was no mistaking the tone of the boy's voice.

"Drop that rifle," he commanded, and the weapon fell to the ground with a clang.

Lowering his own weapon, Jake, drawing a revolver from his belt, advanced to the other and quickly disarmed him by taking away knife and pistols, and then ordering him to stand a little distance off, when he turned to the man who had fallen, pierced by the bullet of his prisoner.

The man was dead.

Accustomed as Jake was to scenes of riot and blood, it was with horror he viewed the corpse, for the silent surroundings, the peace and quiet of the mighty forest were in such contrast with the deed of blood, that the crime of the assassin seemed doubly cruel.

But as Jake gazed on the face lying so still, he became puzzled and worried, for an indefinable idea struggled for existence in his brain, which confused and vexed him.

A something that carried him back for years, and painted a picture of scenes that he had long ago thought passed from memory.

And he stooped down and gazed long and steadfastly at the man before him, while all surrounding him was forgotten.

This fact was quickly perceived by the only other living inhabitant of the glade and with stealthy steps he turned to hasten away, not daring, so great was the awe in which he held the boy, to seek to recover his arms.

But he had not gone far when he was stopped, for even plunged in thought as he was the lad noticed his departure, yet there was no anger in his tones as he called to him to come back.

And the other, turning retraced his steps, and coming close to Jake awaited what he might have to say.

For this was one of the band who had sworn allegiance to the boy when he came among them and by his courage and his determination had won the place of leader of the Vigilantes.

Brierwood Bob, as he was called, was one of the band, however, whom Jake never trusted entirely, for he was rash and reckless to a fault and so impetuous that he sometimes disobeyed the most imperative orders.

In answer to a question or two he now explained his conduct, which seemed heartless and cruel.

"I was lying in the thicket by the woods, a short time ago, when I saw this man drop out from the crowd that followed you, and, after a short time, enter the woods.

"He was immediately tackled by Gustin, and, as it wasn't none of my funeral, I let 'im alone. This one here," he continued, indicating the dead man by a slight gesture, "soon downed Gus, and I was thinking of taking a hand in the row when I saw him take some papers from Gus, and light out with them.

"I thought I could do better service by following him up to see the end of this; but recognized him as one of 'King Cole's' band and as he was about to draw his gun, I downed him,

not intending to kill but to wound. The uncertain light fooled me. He would have hung anyway. You know that was the sentence."

This somewhat long harangue satisfied Jake, and picking up the wallet which Bob had dropped he bade him return to his post, asking his pardon for the manner in which he had treated him.

"That's all right, Cap. We're a rough lot, anyway, and harsh measures are allowed," and turning he strode off in the direction of the road, after securing his weapons, while Jake, slowly pursuing the opposite direction entered the deeper shadow of the woods and soon disappeared.

Him we must follow.

A walk of half an hour brought him to a clearing in the wood which could be reached by the single path alone, which he had followed, so dense was the undergrowth on all sides.

A challenge and a password had been exchanged more than once during his walk, and, as he entered the glade, he was stopped again by a sentinel on watch at the edge of the clearing.

He gave the word and then, turning to the sentinel, he said:

"Tom, come with me for a few moments. One of the boys will relieve you," and soon followed by the other he struck across the glade and entered the cabin which occupied the center.

Seating himself at the table and motioning to his companion to do likewise, Jake produced the wallet he had placed in his pocket and, opening it, threw the papers it contained on the table.

"I have seen, to-night, Tom, for the first time in years, the evil spirit of my evil spirit, and what the result will be time alone will tell. These papers may aid us; help me to look over them."

It took but a few moments to examine the papers, for they were all printed slips of non-important matters. All except one, and this was what was written thereon:

"M. 7. 3. 9. 8. 23. 21. 6. 3. 1. 7. 16. 2. 19. 27. 18. 26. 20. 8. 11. 3. 1. 24. 27. 20. 7. 24. 2. 8. 23. 20. NORTH-EAST 7. 4. 24. 27. 20. 24. 21. 13. 3. 9. 23. 20. 16. 6. ZERO 24. 2 [1-6th] 25. 16. 26. 20. 1. 1. 22. 20. 8. 4. 16. 4. 20. 6. 18. 3. 1. 20. 8. 3. (666) (6) 16. 10. 20.

"No. 1."

And the two puzzled over it until the dawn, creeping through the forest, warned Jake that he had been up all night and sadly needed rest, when he threw himself on a blanket in the corner, and, in a moment, was fast asleep.

CHAPTER VI.

TREACHERY.

BOB pursued his way quickly through the woods, and soon arrived at the spot where the man he had spoken of as Gustin lay chained as if he were a wild beast.

Bob and Gustin were not on the best of terms, and it was with no intense anxiety to free him, displayed in his movements, that the boy approached the prostrate man.

"A nice fix ye'r in," sarcastically remarked the former, as he bent over him and examined

his fastenings. "Must have been a professional that captured you."

A short inspection proved to him that it would be useless to attempt to release him, and he determined to await the coming of assistance before he made any further attempts; yet he made Gustin as comfortable as possible, and then retreated a little into the woods, where he took up his station, and watched as only those who fear danger in every sound can watch for their foes.

The crowd, that had followed Jake after his escape from the saloon, had long since returned, cursing and grumbling at the ill-luck which had permitted him to escape.

The road was entirely deserted, and nothing was heard save those mysterious sounds of the night which are never quiet.

And so the night wore on, and day came, the time being unbroken by any incident until the two men came from the clearing who were to relieve Bob and Gustin.

Then Gustin was released; for Bob went and returned with the keys he had rifled from the pocket of the man lying dead not far away, and unlocking the handcuffs and other chains, set Gus loose.

Then he proposed a return to the cabin where rest and refreshment awaited them, asking the newly released man how it happened that he had been so completely overcome in the late encounter.

But Gustin seemed in no mood to answer and, instead of following his comrade, turned and saying that he would look up the road a short distance, he plunged into the thicket and disappeared, leaving Bob to retrace his steps alone.

He soon arrived at the place where lay the man who had fallen a victim to his rifle, and hardened and callous as he was he stood over him for a moment, regretting what had happened.

He had recognized him as one of a band of desperadoes who infested the country, and, thinking he was on Jake's trail with no good intention, had shot him down, as he would a mad-dog which threatened him, for the stranger evidently knew he was followed and was preparing to do as had been done to him.

As the sun struggled through the trees and lit up the arches of the forest, Bob, thinking there might be a clew of some sort, stooped over the body and examined the pockets but without discovering anything of importance.

As he was about to turn away, however, he noticed that the lining of his coat was frayed at the edge and, stooping closer, saw that there was a paper concealed inside of which he quickly got possession and unfolded.

It was addressed to "Henry Crane, Esq., Paydirt, Col.," and bore in the corner the stamped address of a well known detective agency in the East.

Thinking that the envelope might be of importance, he placed it carefully in his pocket, and pursued his way to the camp, where he soon arrived, and, after a slight lunch, in his turn, dropped off to sleep, in a room adjoining where Jake was resting.

All was quiet, and the glade was deserted for some time, until suddenly the figure of Gustin appeared, as he walked carelessly across, and then, seeing that he was not noticed, stole quietly into the cabin and to the room where Jake was, reaching whom, he leaned over.

The papers Jake had been examining were tightly clinched in his hand, and as the boy slumbered lightly, Gustin saw that the slightest attempt to remove them would awaken him instantly.

Seeking the spot where the boy's heart beat, and casting another hasty glance around, he raised his knife on high to sink it to the hilt, and at the same moment clasp his lips with his other hand, that no cry might ring out and warn the camp that their leader was being done to death, foully and cruelly.

No sound disturbed him, and the knife descended with lightning speed.

CHAPTER VII.

A MURDEROUS THREAT.

As the trap-door closed with a slam, the man who had been addressed by Job as captain, drew from one side of the room a long, low bench, on one end of which he placed a folded coat, and motioned to the man to lay his burden there.

After lying a few moments, while the three men stood around and watched, with varying emotions, the pale face of their victim, the girl slowly opened her eyes and looked about her in terror at her surroundings.

As her eyes encountered those of the so-called captain she shuddered, while a look of intelligence overspread her speaking countenance.

"An unexpected pleasure this, Miss Mary," he sneered, his mouth growing set in baleful lines as he marked the disgust so well written on the girl's face.

And throwing himself into the chair he had lately quitted, he laughed sardonically.

For a moment there was silence, and then the girl's impetuous nature, overleaping all bounds, burst forth, as she rose to her feet and addressed the sneering villain before her.

"An honorable trick that you have played, is it not, to have enticed a poor and friendless girl here under pretense of seeing her brother; and that brother—what have you done with him? I know you, Cole Crane, and if you think that any threats of yours will bear aught of fruit, I warn you beforehand of the fallacy of such an opinion. I refuse, absolutely, to listen to you, and appeal to these men to aid me in escaping from your persecutions!" and turning, she stood with outstretched hands looking toward the others.

But there was no response to her appeal.

The hardened demon who ruled there merely laughed again, while the two men, who were his tools, paid no more attention to the supplicating entreaties of the girl than to the waters that lapped uneasily below.

And then, as her utter helplessness became apparent to her, the poor child uttered a despairing cry, and burying her face in her hands, sunk half-insensible on the bench at her side.

She was soon restored to consciousness by a

rude hand laid on her shoulder, and shaking off the insulting grasp, leaped to her feet with face aflame.

"Listen, my dainty lady," fairly hissed the voice of her tormentor, "and reserve your tears for more fit places and times. You know why I have brought you here, and if you were trapped by the pretty fiction I planned it is no cause for complaint, for it is too late for any such nonsense.

"When last I saw you, you derided me; scoffed at all I said; defied me, and dared me to do my worst; and then, forsooth, showed me the door.

"And now it is *my* turn!

"Here is the paper you shall sign—must sign, or the next out-going tide bears your body on its surface, and another mysterious disappearance will excite a nine-days' wonder.

"Read carefully and well; for if once you sign I know that your pride, my haughty beauty, will force you to abide by all you promise.

"I leave you to yourself and to your own reflections for a time."

And calling to his followers, the three descended the ladder, stepped into the boat, and soon the throbbing of the oars in the thole-pins grew fainter, and was gradually lost in the distance.

The girl was alone.

Alone, and with the terrible realization before her that but a short time was given her in which to decide what would be to her a matter of life or death.

Yet delay was dangerous; the need for action was pressing, and every second that passed brought nearer to her the moment when she must cut the Gordian knot which bound her in its meshes of steel.

A last hurried inspection of the apartment where she was alone gave her no hope of escape, offered no means of rescue; and it was a heart still heavier than before, still weightier with its woe, that she turned to seat herself once more at the table, where lay the paper that was of such vital importance to her.

As she walked across the room she stumbled, her foot having caught some projection in the floor, and it was only by a violent and hasty effort that she saved herself from falling.

Turning, she looked to see what object it was that had so nearly caused her what might have been a serious injury, and found that it was one of the heavy staples set in the floor to hold the bar with which the trap-door was secured when the room was inhabited.

Scarce thinking of it twice, she seated herself and reached for the document that lay near her when she started as if a bolt from heaven had come crashing through the roof.

And in truth, the inspiration which came to her was but little less than providential.

Through some unaccountable oversight, the late tenants of the cabin had neglected to take with them the massive iron bar which held the trap; and it was the work of a moment to place it in the staples, to secure it by the hook, and to realize that her position was all but impregnable.

Yet such was the case.

But as the full misery of her position struck her as the tension of her nerves gave way, she threw her hands high in the air, with a cry of agony and, for the second time that day, fell to the floor in a dead faint.

There she lay, while the tide rose, the hungry waters dashing high toward the tops of the supporting spiles and the wind moaned around the corners of the cabin, and in a short time the measured beat of the oars was heard again, as the boat returned.

Reaching the steps the leader made the painter fast to a cleat in one of the uprights, and then mounted the ladder.

Reaching the top he raised his hand and tried to raise the trap.

It would not budge!

CHAPTER VIII.

A WESTERN VERDICT.

BRIERWOOD BOB was restless.

He was, ordinarily, a sound sleeper; one of those who, wrapping themselves up until only their noses are visible, turn onto one side and, in a moment, are buried in slumber.

But this morning he was restless and instead of lying quietly, tossed and tumbled and rolled in a vain endeavor to find a comfortable attitude, and at length coming to the conclusion that he was wide awake, sat bolt upright and looked around.

Then he yawned and stretched his arms as if he would dislocate them, finally rising to his feet and without putting on his boots, which he had removed when he sought his couch, strolled to the window and looked out.

No one was visible and he turned back to the room which was empty save for his presence.

Then an inspiration came to him; he would go into the adjoining room and see if Jake was still asleep, for the rules of the camp were lenient as regarded the occupation of the different apartments and he intended moving quietly so as not to disturb the boy if he were not yet awake.

So he went to the door which was ajar, and putting his eye to the crack, looked in.

And as he looked he dashed the door open with a blow which sent it crashing against the wall with a noise sufficient to waken the dead, and leaping across the room, grasped Gustin's arm as it descended, guiding the knife toward Jake's heart.

It was too late to arrest the blow, yet he succeeded in turning it to one side so that the knife blade, instead of entering the boy's body, struck deep into the floor and stuck there, quivering.

At the noise made by the clanging door the lad leaped to his feet and, half-awake as he was, was almost stupefied at seeing the two men rolling on the floor like wild beasts, each one clutching at the throat of the other.

A short but severe struggle on the part of Jake, separated the two and they stood glaring at each other, watching the earliest opportunity that would present when they might again be at one another's throats.

"What does this mean?" sternly asked the youth as he waved to Tom Reynolds, who, at-

tracted by the noise, came rushing in, to keep silence.

Gustin was the first to recover his breath.

"Brierwood, there was just a-goin' to knife yer, when I see'd him and grabbed his arm."

This was too much for Bob, who gave vent to a long whistle that completely exhausted his remaining breath.

In a moment, however, he managed to stammer out:

"What a screamin' liar. Cap! If it hadn't 'a' been for me you would 'a' been a cold corpse. That Greaser there would 'a' sent you to kingdom come in a holy minute if I—"

"Stop!" interrupted the lad; "which is right and which is wrong we will find out later. You both owe me a grudge I believe, though I did think you true, Bob."

"Tom, call one of the men," and soon another of the band appeared on the scene.

The two combatants were quickly disarmed and confined in two rooms situated overhead, where they could not reach each other, and where they were carefully guarded by a sentry at their doors.

By noon the whole band, with the exception of one man who watched the path that led to the clearing, was assembled at the cabin.

There was an even dozen of them, all hardy frontiersmen, who had banded together to stamp out, if men could, the curse of the band of King Cole, a noted highwayman, road-agent and horse-thief who was the scourge of the country.

The circumstances of the attack were related by Jake and the stories of the two men listened to, the knife being placed in evidence, but without avail, as it belonged to neither of them, being one that had lain on the table since the day previous.

Three men were told off to decide what should be done, one of whom was Tom Reynolds, and they having retired to deliberate, the rest seated themselves to watch the prisoners and await the verdict.

It was but half an hour before the jury returned.

In view of the fact, they said, that it was impossible to place the guilt on either party, they had decided that the men should be fastened together by the collars and chain which had confined Gustin the night before; they were to be lowered into a canyon near by, and each one being given a knife, they were to be left to fight a duel unto death, the victor to use a key which would be thrown down, to unfasten him from his dead comrade.

The idea was an acceptable one, and the programme was carried out, the men being warned that a rifle-shot would pierce the brain of the first who attacked the other before the word.

The collars were placed on their necks and locked, the steel chain confining them being less than a yard in length; they were conducted to the edge of the canyon, some fifty feet in depth, and lowered over the side by ropes, while Tom stood with cocked rifle to see that no foul blow was struck.

Then as they reached the bottom and the loosened ropes fell at their feet, he gave one last

look, and shouting "Now!" turned and left the brink.

The enemies were alone and chained together!

CHAPTER IX.

PLOTTING.

IN "The Nugget," which, at this hour in the morning, was well-nigh deserted except for an occasional in-comer, who clanked in noisily, took his "p'ison" and departed, two men were seated at one of the tables, in low and earnest conversation.

"The boy must be silenced," was what one of them was saying, he who seemed to be the superior of the two, as might be judged from a certain air he assumed, as well as from the respect shown him by the other.

"The manner in which he braved us the other night, the result of which was the death of two of our best men and the wounding of another, has injured us seriously, and there is much grumbling in the gang that we do not take active measures. What can you suggest?"

"He has friends who never desert him," replied the other, "and who will go straight to death for him. His plans are so well laid, and he knows the country and the men so thoroughly, that it must be by some strategy that we capture him, if capture him we do. What on earth did the captain want to leave at this time for, I wonder?" and with an exclamation of disgust he raised his glass and drained its contents.

"The captain is playing for big stakes, and knows what he is doing so don't grumble. If we can get the boy to leave here or force him to abandon his camp, we shall be all right. Do you hear anything from Gustin?"

"Gustin promises to settle the matter to-day. He had a note from the captain which gave him certain orders and they were to be executed about this time; but let us go down to the mine: we ought to find the boys there."

And the two men, having paid their score, left the saloon and, mounting their horses, rode off down the road toward the valley.

After riding for two or three miles they turned off at a bridle-path and, following it for some distance, came to an opening where all was bustle and activity.

A shaft had been sunk in the solid rock and half a dozen men were at work, raising by means of the windlass, the rock and ore which had been dug out below.

At sight of the two men who rode into the clearing they ceased from their labors and one of them, calling down the shaft, summoned to the surface the men hidden there, who, some twenty in number, soon appeared.

This was the famous band of King Cole, as he was called, and it was only as a subterfuge that they pretended to work the shaft which was absolutely worthless.

The men gathered about the late arrivals and listened eagerly to what was said.

Such words as "the night stage," "heavy sum to pay off the men at the 'Vista,'" "one o'clock," were heard and the men hearing a warning signal from their sentinel hidden in the woods, disappeared or resumed their labors as a stranger rode into the open space.

"I come, sir," he said addressing the leader of the gang, "direct from Captain Cole. My name is—well you would not know me by name—but when I say to you, 'Six-sixty-six-six ave,' you will probably recognize that I have sufficient credentials to—"

"Enough, sir," returned the other. "As I expected you your introduction is sufficient. What commands have you for me?"

"None that I can give here. Meet me at ten sharp with six men for the coach business. Yes, I know that you see," he continued as the other started. "Leave the rest of the men in the shaft and one on guard here to lower the bucket to them when they are needed—do not delay but be sure to be on hand *on time*."

And with no further word the young man rode off with no glance back, and after giving his orders the other followed him.

CHAPTER X.

READING THE CRYPTOGRAM.

WHEN Tom returned to the cabin after giving the word to Bob and Gustin, he found Jake, with his head resting on his two hands, which clutched his hair, poring over the mysterious paper which had so excited his curiosity.

"Come here, Tom," he cried, as the other entered, "and see if you can help me to decipher this confounded thing, which, I believe, must have some bearing on our affairs. Sit down here and let us see what we can do with it," and drawing up a stool, Tom seated himself by his companion.

Jake had the mysterious document spread out before him on the table, and Tom looked at it carefully.

But what significance could be attached to such an array of figures as this:

"M. 7. 3. 9. 8. 23. 21. 6. 3. 1. 7. 16. 2. 19. 27. 16. 26. 20. 8. 11. 3. 1. 24. 27. 20. 7. 24. 2. 8. 23. 20. NORTHEAST 7. 4. 24. 27. 20. 24. 21. 13. 3. 9. 23. 20. 16. 6. ZERO 24. 2. [1-6th] 25. 16. 26. 20 1 1 22. 20. 8. 4. 16. 4. 20. 6. 18. 3. 1. 20. 8. 3. (666) (6) 16. 10. 20.

"No. 1."

"I find," continued Jake, "that of all the numbers which we have here, the number '20' is repeated more than any other. Now I've heard somewhere that the letter 'E' is used more than any other, but even if 20 is 'E' what further clew have we?"

"If 20 is E, Jake," said Tom, "try and see if any other letter can be discovered which precedes it. There are ten 20's, are there not? Now take the first one. What comes just before it? 26? Now wait a minute," and Tom wrote down the alphabet, numbering "E" as "20," and numbering the other letters in like order as they followed thus:

20, E. 21, F. 22, G. 23, H. 24, I. 25, J. 26, K. 27, L. 28, M. 20, N., etc.

"Now try. The number preceding the first 20 is 26. We have here, for 26, 'K,' 'KE,' No, that will not do. Try the next one. 27? That is L. Try the next; the writer *must* have used the word 'the' which is one of the commonest in the language. What number precedes the next 20? 23! Hurrah! 23, in my list is H and 8 *must* be T, if the word THE is used there. It may be only HE. But let me see. What is the highest number in your mysterious

note? 27? and there are twenty-seven letters in the alphabet, including the abbreviation &, then— But wait," and Tom stuck his nose down to the table and studied earnestly for a moment.

"What do 'M' at the beginning and 'No. 1' at the end mean? Can 'M' be '1' and so on? Let us try. We must go to 27 and then—" and Tom wrote again:

1, M. 2, N. 3, O. 4, P. 5, Q. 6, R. 7, S. 8, T. 9, U. 10, V. 11, W. 12, X. 13, Y. 14, Z. 15, &. 16, A. 17, B. 18, C. 19, D. 20, E. 21, F. 22, G. 23, H. 24, I. 25, J. 26, K. 27, L.

"Now, try that, paying no attention to the 'NORTHEAST,' and 'ZERO;' we will try those afterward."

With the aid of this key, which was astonishing in its simplicity, Jake wrote rapidly:

"MsouthfromsandlaketwomilesintheNORTH-EAST pileifyouhearZEROin[1-6th] kill!!! Jakegetpaperco meto(666)(6)ave."

And this divided into words and properly punctuated gave:

"South from the Sand Lake, two miles. In the northeast spile. If you hear nothing ('Zero') in two months (1-6th of a year) kill!!! Jake, come to (666) (6) ave."

Jake was unconsciously right when he had said that it concerned him!

But to whom was it directed? It was doubly necessary to be on his guard, for here was some unknown enemy ordering his assassination, and who knew but the time must now be up!

Like a flash the recollection of the attack of the morning came to him; and had not he recovered the paper from Bob? If Bob were faithless, on whom could he rely?

He even cast a hasty glance at Tom, who was sitting there, scowling at the threatening document, but reproached himself instantly for his suspicions.

In a few moments Jake's countenance cleared and, turning to his companion, he said:

"Tom, we have now been together for months and I have always found you the firmest friend I have ever known. To aid you in assisting me to unravel this mystery, I must talk to you of my early life, for it has influenced my present one, and it is but right that you should know it. Listen—"

"Now, Jake," broke in Tom, heartily, "your secrets are your own, and no one has a right to know them. Keep them, my boy, and we will endeavor to trace this scoundrel from what I know now. But," as a gesture from Jake interrupted him, "if you think it best, go on; and I will aid you the best way I know how."

And settling back, he prepared to listen to the boy's story.

CHAPTER XI.

HER "LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT."

A TREMENDOUS oath broke out on the intense stillness that pervaded everything, as Cole Crane discovered that the trap-door was fastened against him.

He realized, when it was too late, what a mistake he had made in not removing the means that secured the trap, and, stepping down into the boat, he secured one of the heavy ash oars and remounted the ladder.

Using the stick as a weapon, he endeavored to batter in the door, and failing in that, the floor surrounding, but with no result.

The thumping on the floor aroused the girl, and it was with a feeling of terror that she watched the results of the effort.

In a moment the voice of Cole again broke out, and it was with many a threat that he spoke:

"Your turn now, my lady; but you will soon learn how useless it is to brave Cole Crane and to defy him. Keep your nest, and when I return my vengeance shall be doubly wreaked on you for this. Expect me soon, and," speaking sarcastically and cruelly, "do not, I beg of you, venture out; you might wet your dainty feet!"

And with a chilling laugh he turned and re-entered the boat, which was again rowed off over the waters.

And the girl was saved, for a short time, at least, for she knew that if he had gone to seek means with which to effect an entrance, some time must necessarily elapse before he could return.

With an effort she seated herself at the table and opened the document he had left with her, determined to try and lose her thoughts in reading the written words.

After a date and some preamble the document ran:

"In consideration of these facts I hereby relinquish all title and claim to the property set forth below, and do also desire to state that I know of no person who can be injured by this disposition of the said property, my brother, Henry Crane, having died on the 14th of March last, and leaving me his sole heir.

"So, there being no claim, I do devise, bequeath and give to Cole Crane, his heirs and assigns forever, all right, title and interest I may have in any and all property that I may die possessed of, be it real or personal, and, naming the said Cole Crane as my executor, do desire that he give no bond for the performance of his duties under this my last will and testament."

Then followed a long list of property, the sum total of the value of which mounted well up in the millions, the variety and amount of which bewildered the girl who had been sore driven to earn an honest living.

What could this mean!

That some crime was intended she well knew, but she was ignorant what effect this document would have.

That her father was dead she knew, for, tracked through the swamp where he had gone hunting, the dead body of her only surviving parent on the day he left her, had been found; but her brother had disappeared, and no trace of him had ever been discovered.

The home she loved had been sold and she was thrown on the world, a helpless child, and it was only after severe struggles that she had made a little home for herself with her pen.

And only this morning she had been so happy when the post brought her this note:

"Your brother and I have just landed from a wrecked ship. He is seriously hurt and cannot be moved, and I cannot leave him. Get to False Point, Long Island, as quickly as possible and you will see your brother. But hasten."

And this was signed by an unfamiliar name:

but she, forgetting all else in her anxiety to reach her wounded brother, had hurried to her destruction.

And here she was at the mercy of a man who, she knew, hesitated at nothing to accomplish his ends.

And as the hours rolled on and she saw no hope of rescue, her heart failed her, and, as toward evening, she again heard the boat approaching she grew wild with fear.

But the craft grated against the steps, a heavy foot sounded on the planks and with a fierce blow the building shook as a cruel voice bade her open, instantly or fear the worst!"

CHAPTER XII.

THE DUEL.

As Bob and Gustin were lowered down into the canyon which promised to be the death-bed and grave of one or both of them, the innate cowardice of the Mexican was apparent in his chattering teeth and ghastly-hued visage.

During the descent, which occupied some little time, he endeavored to suggest to Bob that they should merely feign to engage in a duel, and, when there were no witnesses, should release themselves and escape.

But Bob was not to be tempted.

"Shut up, you slinking cur!" he cried, "or by the Eternal I will knife you now and run the chances of a bullet from Tom's rifle."

The Mexican seeing that Bob could not be influenced, desisted, and, as the most cowardly will turn when sore pressed, nerved himself for the coming encounter.

In a moment more they had reached the bottom, and, the ropes being slackened and drawn from under their arm-pits, they awaited the signal.

As Tom's voice rung out "Now!" Bob braced himself for the coming shock and watched Gustin, warily.

The place was a desolate one, and in and out of the crevices in the rock glided a number of rattlesnakes, while others lay coiled and basking in the sun, which was now high overhead.

As the two men stood, with their hands hanging loosely by their sides, each one clasping in his right a long, slender, wicked looking knife, a louder rattle than ordinary sounded just at Bob's feet.

Involuntarily he turned his eyes in the direction of the sound and moved a pace aside.

At the instant Gustin raised his knife and plunged it at the other's side, aiming at his vitals.

The blow was quick and true, but as it descended, Bob, with equal quickness, interposed his left arm, and the keen blade, driven with deadly hate, caught him in the muscles of his fore-arm where it stuck.

Almost unconscious of the pain which followed the stab, the American, taking advantage of the bending to one side of the Mexican, quick as thought sent his steel crunching into the back of his enemy and gave the haft a side-long twist which opened a gaping wound and brought the blood in torrents.

The loss of his own equilibrium in connection with the crushing force of the blow sent the Mexican, stumbling to the ground and in

falling he wrenched his knife clear of Bob's arm.

As Gustin fell, the tightening of the chain which bound them together, dragged Bob after him, and he, throwing his arm out to save himself from a dangerous fall, flung his knife yards into the air whence it fell with a clang onto the rocks, some distance away.

The American gave himself up for lost, unarmed as he was, but as the Mexican, with a gleam of triumphant hate in his eyes raised himself on his left elbow and lifted his knife to again seek Bob's life, his muscles relaxed, a reddish foam issued from his lips, and as his features settled he fell back, dead.

The point of Bob's knife had reached his heart, and he was dying when he fell.

The reaction from the stern tension in which he had held himself was too great, and the victor in this life-and-death struggle, falling back, insensible, lay beside his victim, to all appearance as lifeless as he was.

And the minutes rolled on, the sun passed from over-head and as the shadows crept over the bottom of the canyon, the serpents, uncoiling themselves, crawled away, noiselessly, to their dens, and the two lay there, the living and the dead, locked in the steel embrace which bound them fast.

As the rays of the departing sun ceased to beat down upon him, the increasing coolness of the air revived Bob, and with a slow and painful motion he raised himself, trying to recollect what had passed.

The tug of the collar on his neck, as the chain tightened recalled him to his surroundings, and in a moment all was clear.

And his first thought was to relieve himself from his ghastly burden.

He recalled, as one recalls the indistinct features of a half-recollected dream, the noise of the falling key, which would release him, as it struck the rocks when thrown down to them; but where it had fallen he had not seen.

Look in every direction as he might he could not discover it, and it was more than probable that it had fallen into one of the numerous crannies and crevices which seamed and split the rocky bottom of the canyon on all sides.

He was weak and faint from loss of blood, and his arm was stiff and sore and almost useless, while a severe wound on his head, made by the jagged point of rock as he had fallen, gave him intense pain.

Yet the indomitable courage of the man asserted itself, and he staggered to his feet, raising the cold and clammy corpse of his late comrade beside him.

The walls of the canyon were well-nigh perpendicular, yet he managed to ascend them, how he never knew.

He relieved himself from the suffocating weight of his horrible burden, somewhat, by fastening his belt to the body and slinging it over his shoulder; but even had he been thus unincumbered, the ascent would have been perilous.

But at last he reached the summit and managed to crawl to the cabin, where, raising himself to open the door, his strength deserted him, and stumbling forward, he fell heavily inside

the room, where Jake and Tom were sitting, with the dead body across his back.

Which was the dead and which the living?

CHAPTER XIII.

A VISITOR.

"So you think that this Cole Crane, who is distantly related to you, is the man who killed your father in the swamp, and who is at the head of this band of road-agents?" said Tom, as Jake finished his somewhat long recital.

"The same man," emphatically repeated Jake. "But what can have become of him? Just as we were about to bring our plans to a focus, and with his capture break up his infernal band, he disappears, and all trace of him is lost."

"We must find that out. But what can have become of your sister, Jake? Have you never heard anything of her?"

"Not a word. When I finally escaped from the swamp, which I thought would never release me, I fell sick from exposure and the terrible strain to which I had been subjected, and when I recovered and returned to the plantation, strangers were in possession and all trace of Mary was lost."

"I got a clew from one of the old negroes on the place, and came West, where I found Crane, who was supposed to be in league with the robbers; but there was no evidence that such was the case."

"I believed that in breaking up his band, if he was connected with them, that I would further my own ends, and now everything seems to be ruined by his disappearance. If—"

Jake stopped and sprung to his feet, as did Tom, as they heard a fumbling at the door.

As they turned and watched, the door flew open, and, stumbling headlong forward, the form of Bob pitched into the room and fell prone to the floor, the bloody corpse of the dead Mexican clanking after it as the chain rattled as they fell.

For a moment the two were paralyzed with horror, and then, springing forward, they raised the awful burden from Bob's shoulder, while Tom, with a blow from a hatchet he had snatched up, shivered the chain to atoms.

In a short time Bob was restored to consciousness, and after some little attention and refreshment, was able to sit up and tell his story to the two friends.

His wounds were carefully bathed and washed, and Jake, his heart smiting him for having suspected the brave fellow of treachery, made him lie down and rest, while he opened the envelope which Bob had given him, and which had been found on the body of the man killed that morning.

The reading of the message contained therein gave a cruel shock to the boy, for it told him that the bearer was possessed of important information which he had gathered in the East, being connected with the detective agency to which Jake had written when Crane disappeared.

But how was it that Bob had recognized him as one of the band of road-agents?

Evidently the brave fellow had become one of them for the purpose of gathering further in-

formation, armed with which he was on his way to Jake, when the unfortunate and fatal rifle shot fired by Bob had wrought his death.

While all this was passing through his mind, another interruption occurred.

In charge of one of the sentinels who guarded the path leading to the road, came a prisoner, who demanded to be led straight before Restless Jake.

As he was marched into the room where the boy was seated, puzzling over the various branches of his case, we can recognize him as the man who had addressed the leader of the outlaws at the fictitious mine not long before.

"Speak out, sir; I have no secrets from my friends," said Jake, as he stood awaiting the other's reply.

"I see that you have Watson's note, Mr. Crane," returned the unknown, pointing to the open sheet of paper Jake held. "Where is he now—but no matter; my credentials are here," and producing them he handed the package to Jake.

The latter examined them hurriedly, and then, ordering the sentinel to return to his post, beckoned to Tom and the stranger to follow him, stepped out into the open air, and, seating himself on a log, motioned the others to do the same.

Turning to the stranger he then said, shortly and curtly:

"Well?"

The answer came to him like a thunderbolt from a clear sky, and for a moment stunned him.

"Your sister has been abducted, suppositiously by Cole Crane, all trace of her being lost. If you would save her you must leave for New York, immediately, and pray that you may arrive in time, for it is a matter of life and death with her, I fear!"

CHAPTER XIV.

AN UNEXPECTED BLOW.

A HEAVY storm-cloud, black as the depths of Erebus, lifted its inky folds high in the north-west, hung threatening as a pall, while, seaming it from end to end with a glittering rope of reddish gold, the lightning sprung from time to time, followed by the low growl of the threatening thunder.

As the approaching cloud-burst gathered in strength, and drew near with increasing rapidity, the little band, of which Jake was the leader, one by one, left the cabin in the clearing, until none but Jake and Tom remained.

With a parting word of caution, the latter, grasping his friend's hand, bade him farewell, and he too took the path that led to the road, and the boy was left alone.

Alone, but for the two dead bodies that lay so quietly side by side, covered with the same blanket, in the adjoining room; for Bob had so far recovered as to be able to go into the town, and had started some time before sundown.

It was an evening full of horrors, brightened by the uncanny occupants of the cabin; and when eleven o'clock came, it was with a feeling of relief that Jake stepped outside, and carefully closing the door behind him, struck off into the forest.

Owing to the increased rapidity of his movements, it was but a short time before he arrived in view of the fictitious mine of the outlaws, and, looming through the darkness, he saw the shed which covered the windlass and the mouth of the shaft.

It seemed deserted; yet of this he had been confident, rumor having brought to him the fact that the band occupied a large chamber, excavated at the bottom of the shaft, a position which was well-nigh impregnable.

Amplly stored with water, food and fuel, they were comparatively comfortable, sheltered, as the mouth of the shaft was, by the shed built over it, from the rain and snow.

That there was a man on watch Jake well knew, and his object was to silence him if possible, raise the bucket, and thus trap whatever men were below, like rats in a cave.

So he, dropping flat on hands and knees, stole quietly forward, seeking the shadow of the boulders scattered about, and as he approached the shed, redoubling his caution and advancing absolutely without a sound.

When within a few yards of the structure he raised himself a little, and cautiously looked around.

But as he did so, a thousand sparks danced before his eyes, there was a crashing and a rushing in his ears as if Niagara was whelming him with its flood, and, as a blow from the butt of a rifle felled him to the ground, a figure leaped on him from behind and grasped him by the throat.

The sentinel whom he was stalking, had stalked him, and he lay apparently at the fellow's mercy.

CHAPTER XV.

THE OCEAN'S PREY.

IN unison with the blow that shook the rickety dwelling, the girl trembled in every limb.

It was as though some wild beast, ravenous from hunger, had returned to its den, after an unsuccessful search through the forest for its prey, and found some timid animal entrapped in its lair.

She cast a last look about her in search of relief, but in vain; nothing was to be seen that promised even a momentary aid.

After the first hoarse summons to her to open the door, which had remained unheeded, the voice below had not repeated its call, and all for a few moments was still.

Then came the sound of heavy blows, as if some one were hammering, and as the noise, with sundry pauses, mounted higher and higher, she realized that Crane was endeavoring to reach the roof.

And such was the case.

Having secured a number of long spikes, he had returned, and was now mounting up one of the spiles at the corner, which reached to the top of the cabin, driving the nails as he went and using them as steps on which to climb.

The girl looked hastily up.

The trap which led to the roof was fastened, but the skylight, which afforded light and air, was unprotected.

The slide which secured it was not in place, and nothing but the brittle glass protected the opening.

She saw that if she could drag the table to a point beneath the light, she could reach and close the slide, and she hurried to put her thought into execution.

But the table was heavy and she was frail and weak, besides which she was trembling like a leaf with nervous exhaustion and fright.

Exerting all her strength, she dragged the heavy piece of furniture toward the center of the room, and, nearing the spot beneath the sash, she stopped and climbed up.

Alas, it was too late.

As she turned her face toward the ceiling, a shadow fell on the glass, and as she looked, a scowling face, dark with malignant hate, glared down upon her.

It was Cole Crane, and, shrinking with affright beneath his baleful glance, she cowered and shrunk like a wounded fawn.

And Crane, raising the hammer in his hand, dashed it through sash and glass, sending the splinters in showers down upon her.

Then, releasing the catch, he raised the fragments, and, lowering himself down, dropped on the table and from thence sprung to the floor.

Paying no attention to the shrinking girl, he strode heavily to the trap-door, and, removing the iron bar, raised the trap and called to his companions to come up.

Job and the man who had brought her to this den, entered the cabin, and, without a word, passed over to the corner of the room and seated themselves.

"We will prevent any further escapades on your part, my lady," growled Crane, as, grasping her by the arm with cruel force, he dragged her across the room, where, with the aid of a pair of handcuffs, which he placed on her wrists, he attached her by a chain to a staple sunk in the wall.

Then returning to the table, he picked up and examined the paper he had left with her.

"Not signed!" he hurred; "but no matter, we will dispense with your signature and depend on your word."

Saying a word to Job, the latter prepared some coarse food on a plate and with a cup set it down beside the girl, who was intensely grateful for the cool draught of water.

To eat a morsel would have been impossible, for the muscles of her throat felt drawn and contracted.

"It is no part of our intention to starve you, or to cause you the least physical discomfort—if we can avoid it," he added as the girl glanced at her wrist, reddened by the cruel gyves he had clasped about them.

"But submit to my will you *must*, or a bitter and lingering death will be your portion.

"And you will be the murderess of your brother! Hah, you start now, do you?"

"Note this well; if to-morrow a telegram does not wing its way to my faithful agent, the day after will see your brother shot down like a dog.

"And there is no escape unless you are willing to save him.

"You thought him dead—I know that he lives; curse him! and his life is in my power.

"Think over this and I will tell you how you can save him and yourself."

The girl's agony was doubled.

For now her brother's life was threatened; that brother whom she loved with all of a sister's devotion and who, she had often feared, was dead.

But little time was given her for reflection, however, for Crane, finishing his consultation with his aids, rose and came to where she was chained.

"Now, Miss Mary, an hour is as good as a day for you to decide in.

"You have two alternatives—promise to give your hand to me in marriage, as soon as we can reach the city or—you know the result which will attend your refusal!

"What is your answer?"

Rising as high as her fetters would allow her, the slight form of the girl trembling with pride and passion, she hurled her response back in his teeth:

"Never!" she cried. "Sooner death—death for myself and all I hold dear, than life at such a price."

"So be it," snarled Crane, as he glared at his victim with demoniac fury. "Your blood be upon your own head!"

A word to his confederates and they arose, and, after opening the trap, approached the girl and released the chain from its fastenings in the wall.

One on each side they led her to the foot of the steps, where Crane stood awaiting them on a little platform or landing place built out from one of the supporting spiles.

Here they stopped.

The tide had gone out, and save for the little channel leading up from the bay the marshes were bare.

Hissing low the words which, each and every one, sunk into her heart like a barbed and poisoned arrow, Crane spoke:

"In a minute more, unless you change your answer, you will be fastened to yonder post.

"The tide is out, now, but is on the turn, and soon the hungry waters will come lapping in; hungry for their prey.

"Inch by inch they will rise, striving to in-fold you in their cold and chilling embrace.

"At last they will reach high up to your face, and kiss your dainty lips with the bitterness of their salt spray.

"And finally they will overwhelm you round about; they will steal into your mouth, your ears, your nostrils, and high as you may lift your head, they will climb still higher and higher, until, at length, a final gasp, a final gurgle, and a slow and lingering and torturing death will claim you for the ocean's bride.

"Choose!"

If the girl hesitated, it was only for a moment.

Cruel as was the fate that threatened her, it was preferable to the other alternative, and she spurned his offer.

"Then so be it," he hurtled, mad with rage.

The dead was done, the girl was chained immovably, her feet in the dank grass of the marsh, which coiled about her ankles like cling-

ing serpents, while the boat, containing the three men, disappeared down the creek, the oar-beats sounding like the tickings of the seconds which ushered her into eternity.

And soon all was still and nothing was heard but the soft swish of the waters as the tide turned and began to flood the bare land.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE WHELMING WATERS.

THE blow which had sent Jake crashing to the ground would, in all probability, have ended his career then and there, had it not been for the wind.

A sudden gust, blowing from the north, just at the moment the blow descended, had caught the broad brim of his *sombrero* and turned it down over the side of his head.

This saved him.

The interposition of the thick felt deadened the effects of the stroke and, although, for an instant, he was stunned and dazed, this result was but momentary.

Quick as thought he sprang to his feet and confronted his foe, made visible at that instant by a flash of forked lightning.

In an instant they were locked in each other's arms, turning and writhing in all the sinuosities of a life-and-death struggle, neither of them having the advantage.

There was no opportunity offered to draw weapon of any kind; each one was too intent on preventing such action on the part of the other to attempt it.

Panting they tore at each other with muscles set like bands of steel and chest locked against chest, until the flesh on arm and bone was black and blue and sore from the pressure, yet neither felt any pain.

A somewhat larger stone than the ordinary boulders which strewed the plain, lay near where the two were struggling, its presence being made known to Jake by the lightning.

And toward this rock the boy forced his opponent, who was unaware of its proximity.

The tension was so great that he yielded in the slightest degree, but this was fatal.

Taking advantage of the slight relaxation of the other's muscles, the lad, nerving himself for a last effort, threw himself with herculean strength against the other, who tottered slightly backward.

His legs encountered the rock behind him, and before he could rally himself he fell backward at full length, Jake adding the entire weight of his body to the force of the crushing fall.

The result was victory for the boy, for the other was completely prostrate and was nearly, if not wholly, insensible from the shock.

Another moment decided the fray, for Jake's sinewy hands had soon bound the other with his leathern belt, and, gagging him with his handkerchief, he rolled him to one side, as helpless as a log.

Then, after resting a moment, and sitting down to regain his breath, he proceeded, still cautiously to crawl under the shed where was the windlass used in raising and lowering the bucket in the shaft.

This was the only means of ascent and descent which the desperadoes made use of in entering and leaving their subterranean abode, and it once removed, those inside would be completely trapped unless assistance was rendered them from outside.

There was no need of further precautions as it turned out, for the only sentry was powerless to warn the miners, as they called themselves.

As Jake reached the windlass, he caught hold of the handle and essayed to raise the bucket, but it was fast below and the rope would not give an inch.

Drawing his knife from its sheath, he was about to cut the strands of the rope and let it fall to the bottom, when an unusual sound attracted his attention, and he rushed out into the open air.

Far up the valley sounded a roaring and a tumbling and a crashing as if the very entrails of the mountain were rent asunder and torn into a million fragments, while mingled with this awful turmoil came a shrieking and yelling as if Pandemonium were let loose.

Glued to the earth for a moment, Jake stood, and then, turning he fled up the sides of the ravine or narrow valley in terror-stricken haste.

Grasping vines and rocks, whose jagged edges cut and tore his hands, he clambered for dear life's sake, high up the side, and then, as the walls became almost perpendicular, he clung and watched.

And rearing its foam-covered crest high in the air, a black and seething mass of waters came tearing down the canyon above, its leaping masses ever and anon gleaming into brilliancy, as the lightning played over its surface, while the thunder rolled and crashed as if it would rend the very rocks asunder.

In an instant it had reached the mine, and before Jake could catch his breath, had swept away shed and windlass, while the shaft, one moment filled with the seething waters, the next was piled high with stones, and rock, and earth washed down from above.

The cloud had burst a mile above, and descending on the valley below, had wrought its awful work of destruction and death, before Jake could fairly realize what had happened.

And following in its course came the beating rain, which lashed and stung the boy as he clung to the rock, drenching him in its icy coldness, and all but tearing him from his hold and sweeping him into the hell below.

Dizzy and gasping for breath he hung, watching the tremendous force of the flood, and horror-stricken at the awful fate that had overtaken the bandits.

Yet the very intensity of the storm was its weakness, for it could not long rage with the fury which had marked its breaking.

In a short time, therefore, the rain had ceased, the thunder rolled suddenly in the distance, as the storm-cloud swept on down the mountain-range, and the wind was hushed as if by magic.

Chilled to the marrow, and drenched through and through as he was, Jake with difficulty clambered down the side of the valley until he reached the beginning of the level.

Reaching the road, he turned and mounted the hill which led in the direction of Pay-

dirt, and after walking for a mile or more, suddenly stopped and gave a low whistle.

His signal was instantly answered, and Tom Reynolds, stepping from the shadow of the trees, spoke to him in a low tone.

Gathering the band of his followers about him, Jake quickly gave them the outline of what had passed and then, leaving them again, they disappearing in the darkness, walked up the road a short distance and waited for the stage.

Just below him, his men were secreted in the forest, awaiting the arrival of the vehicle at the place where they were hidden, while, still further down the road lay the band of King Cole, waiting to attack the coach and rob the mail, the express and the passengers.

These latter were unaware of the proximity of the former.

Soon the rumble of wheels was heard and at Jake's hail the lumbering vehicle drew up at the side of the road, while Jake climbed to the seat beside the driver.

The horses trotted on as the boy spoke a few words to the driver in a low tone, and then a second stop was made, the men who were waiting for Jake, climbing in and secreting themselves inside and in the boot under the mailbags, and then the coach proceeded on its downward journey, in the direction of the ambush.

The loud click of a rifle rung out on the air, and a hoarse voice commanded "Halt, and throw up your hands!"

CHAPTER XVII.

WIPING OUT THE BAND.

AT the abrupt summons the driver reined in his horses with a jerk, and as ordered, threw his hands high in the air, as the six men and their leader stepped out onto the road, each one with raised weapon.

Silent and grim they stood there, like so many statues, while the one who seemed highest in authority stepped up to the side of the stage and calling to the express messenger, ordered him to throw down his box.

In answer Jake's revolver cracked, and the road-agent, reeling in his tracks, dropped dead, shot straight between the eyes with a bullet from the boy's pistol.

At the signal the coach swarmed with men who appeared from every conceivable direction and before the band of desperadoes fairly realized what had happened they were surrounded and a dozen rifles covered them.

Seeing that the jig was up, they soon surrendered and were disarmed and marched off into the woods, where Judge Lynch organized his court.

Tom Reynolds, despite his protests, was unanimously elected to preside and the culprits were arraigned before him.

There was but one witness, who, offering his testimony, was listened to in silence.

This was the mysterious stranger who had ridden to the rendezvous of the highwaymen and given out the mysterious countersign "six-sixty-six six ave."

He stood there, somewhat apart from the

others, and, at a sign from the presiding officer, told his story.

It revealed in all of its mystery, what was puzzling both to Jake and Tom in regard to the mysterious document.

Connected with the detective agency in the East, to which Jake had written, he had come out to Paydirt and, after locating the members of the gang, had become a confidant of Gustin, and from him learned many of its secrets.

The Mexican was playing a double role; and while apparently faithful to Jake was in the pay of King Cole.

The plot in which the latter was engaged was wide-spread in its ramifications and promised to pay him well if he succeeded in carrying it out.

Leaving his lieutenant in charge of the band, with instructions to only so act, from time to time, as to keep Jake on the alert, he had gone to the East, where he was playing for high stakes, the losers to be Jake and his sister.

The mysterious document had been shown to him by Gustin, and translated, while it was explained to him that the cabalistic words "six-sixty-six-six ave" were those used as a password by the gang and related to King Cole's head-quarters in New York city.

Another member of the detective force had this clew given to him by the speaker, and as the latter had disappeared for a short time, owing to a slight accident, the other had feared treachery and had, after capturing Gustin, started for Jake's camp with the proofs taken from the Mexican.

As he ceased speaking a terrible stillness fell over the gathering, which was at length broken by the stern voice of Tom Reynolds as he asked:

"Gentlemen, you have heard the evidence which proves that these men are directly connected with the band of King Cole: are they guilty or not guilty?"

"Guilty!" rung out the voices of the jury, as if but one man had spoken.

"And what shall be their punishment?"

"Death!"

The arrangements were soon made.

The outlaws were stationed beneath the spreading limbs of an immense oak, and a noose was tightened about the neck of each one.

Their hands were bound behind them and at a given signal they were swung into the air, where they hung twisting and turning in ghastly array.

Justice had been done, and the band of King Cole was forever broken up.

It seemed a cruel and arbitrary proceeding, but such is law in the West.

When the party had arrived at the road, Jake and Tom exchanged a hearty hand-shake with each of the band, and bidding them farewell, climbed to the top of the stage, accompanied by the Eastern detective, and with a wave of the hand, disappeared down the road.

But as they swept down a deeper descent than ordinary, the driver giving free rein to his team, there was a sudden lurch, a sickening plunge to the right, and as the front, off wheel rolled from its axle the coach gave a grinding crash, and falling to one side, overturned with a tremendous jar.

Jake and his two companions, who were talking so earnestly that no thought of their surroundings occupied them, were pitched high in the air, and falling on the hard road beneath, lay, completely stunned.

The shock was tremendous, and the sudden stoppage of the coach brought the team to a dead halt, 'mid the breaking of traces, the crashing of glass and the oaths of the driver.

The boy was the first to recover his senses, and stunned and confused as he was, set himself to work to bring order out of chaos.

In this he was quickly successful, for the well-trained horses, accustomed to the voice of a master, were soon quieted, and stood, trembling, with the broken harness streaming all about them.

The driver and Tom were found to be unhurt, but the express messenger had been instantly killed.

The detective was disabled by a dislocated shoulder-joint which, while it gave him serious pain, promised to soon heal, and being quickly pulled into place and bound with a rude sort of surgical skill, relieved him somewhat, yet left him helpless.

A short consultation was held.

Any delay would be fatal, and there was not time to hesitate; so commending the wounded man to the care of the driver, who took matters very philosophically, being accustomed to such incidents, and who consoled himself with an extra nip—the two friends, Tom and Jake, bade them adieu, promising to send assistance from the next station.

Stiff and sore as they were, they urged on their horses and soon reached the small town, where they were to change horses, and acquainting the employes with the accident, they quickly procured two fresh horses, better equipped for the journey, and sped on.

It was a wild ride, and one which the two friends often recalled in after life, but they reached their journey's end without further incident, and galloping to the nearest stable, found that they had ample time to procure a much-needed meal before the departure of the train.

Congratulating each other upon the successful termination of their journey, the two friends prepared themselves for their somewhat extended trip; and as the train rolled into the depot they were on the platform awaiting its arrival.

And so two brave hearts are on their journey to rescue the poor victim of King Cole, who is in sore need of their aid and assistance.

Will they arrive in time?

We shall see.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE MIDNIGHT ATTACK.

AND so, at length, the two friends had reached civilization, and its accompaniments, and were fairly on their way to the East.

But even the rapid speed at which they were moving seemed slow to Jake, who burned with an eager anxiety to reach his destination.

And it seemed as if they were destined to reach their journey's end without further inter-

ruption, as the day passed on and nothing occurred to break its monotony.

At last the sun set far in the west, sinking behind the Rockies in a blaze of glory, and the shadows of the night began to steal over the prairie.

Suddenly there was a jolt and a jar, as the brakes were rudely applied, and the train came to a dead stop, with no warning whistle from the engine to denote that they had reached a station.

Jake, who was seated on the inside, raised the window, which the cool air had forced him to close, and, leaning out, looked ahead to see what might be the cause of their stoppage.

A bright light, and the leaping flames and smoke that rose just in front of the engine, at first glance, gave him the impression that the prairie was on fire, and had injured the track.

But this idea lasted but a moment.

Gathered just on the edge of the circle of light, shed by the fire, stood several figures, and shining among the crowd could now and then be seen the glint of the steel barrel of a rifle.

As he looked, there was a puff of escaping steam from the engine, for the engineer, seeing that the way in front was blockaded, had bravely determined to back the train down out of danger.

But the desperate men who had planned the robbery of the express-car and passengers, were not to be balked in their designs.

At the first move he made, as his hand grasped the throttle-bar, a report rung out on the stillness of the night, and, still grasping the iron, the engineer fell back dead, two more bullets piercing his body before his life had fully sped.

A figure leaped into the circle of light, and springing into the cab, stopped the movement of the wheels, as they were beginning slowly to revolve, and push the train backward.

But the act was also fatal to him!

Crouching in the tender, and sheltered from the view of all the onlookers, the fireman was concealed, a mere lad, the brother of the engineer who had just been murdered.

Unseen, he could see perfectly all that happened, and he knew that the man who was in the cab and whose hand was on the lever, was the one who had fired the first shot, which had proven so fatal.

His blood boiled, and regardless of any danger that he might undergo, he sprang from the foot-board into the cab, grasping in his hand the short and heavy hammer he was in the habit of using to break the larger lumps of coal, aiming a crushing blow.

Catching him just above the right ear, the head of the hammer tore through his scalp and descended on to his shoulder, with all the crashing force which the muscular arm of the lad, coupled with the intense rage, hate and despair he felt, could give it.

Half stunned, the desperado reeled and fell over on the seat, blinded by the gushing blood, and his arm rendered useless by the terrific blow on the shoulder.

His eyes blazing with that lurid light which is so often seen to dilate the pupils of a maniac's orbs, the lad sprang on him, his left hand grasp-

ing the chain and swinging open the furnace door as he did so.

Inside the fire was blazing and seething, and the mass of coals at white-heat sent forth a blistering glare that was almost unsupportable.

Yet the boy heeded it not.

Gripping the arms of the prostrate man in a clutch that sunk into the flesh as if it had been wax, he jerked the body around until it lay with head toward the incandescent mass below.

A quick push, and there arose a yell that made the blood of all hearers to curdle and chill like ice.

There was the singe of human hair, the sickening smell of roasted human flesh, and as the wretch, powerless to aid himself, sunk further into the furnace, his eye-balls, distended by steam, burst from their sockets, and he fell to the bars below and was quickly consumed out of all semblance of humanity.

And as the open door threw a broad glare upon the boy who had so fearfully avenged his brother's death, a dozen rifles cracked, and the lad, sinking prone to the floor of the cab, crawled to the dead body of his brother, and entwining him with one arm, the other hanging broken at his side, laid his head upon his breast, and with a long, low moan, died.

In answer to the fusillade which arose and wrought the death of the boy, a solitary response came.

It was from the express car, where the messenger had barricaded himself, and whence, it being next to the engine, he had plainly witnessed the tragedy which had just occurred.

His revolver spoke out defiance and betokened his determination to resist to the last, and although his bullet did not seriously injure any one of the robbers, yet it caused a commotion in their ranks and roused them to decisive action.

So, scattering in the darkness, they prepared, at a given signal, to attack from all sides at once.

The train was well filled with passengers, most of them being "tenderfeet," as late-comers from the East are called, and, with but few exceptions, they were completely terror-stricken.

The two friends, during what had passed and which had taken scarce a minute, had risen from their seats and each one drawn one of his heavy revolvers from their belts, as quietly as if they were about to engage in a friendly shooting-match.

This action on their part made them central figures, and toward them the other men drew as to their leaders.

CHAPTER XIX.

A BRAVE DEFENSE.

TURNING, Jake addressed them.

"Gentlemen, I'm a-goin' to take a hand in this yar scrimmage, an' so is my friend.

"Will you jine us, gentlemen?"

Immediately there was a chorus of exclamations.

"You bet!"

"Sart'in!"

"Sail in, young 'un, we'll see yer through," and the like.

Jake hastily surveyed the group, and in an instant formed his plans.

"To the top of the cars, every man; Tom, you and I to the express car; you others divide.

"And there, lie low, keep cool and we will lick twenty times our number.

"Scatter!"

And taking the lead, the boy plunged out of the forward door, leaped onto the iron railing and thence, reaching up to the edge, quickly clambered to the roof, closely followed by Tom.

There were, including the express car, four coaches in the train, and this allowed two men to devote themselves to the defense of each car.

The men stationed themselves at each end of all the cars so that; by slightly leaning over, they could command the platforms and doors below, while thoroughly protected from the attack of the others.

The band of robbers was composed of, perhaps, twenty men, and their plan was to place a guard at each door while two went through each coach robbing the passengers of all they could get.

Half-a-dozen were to attend to the express car, while the rest were to walk up and down the length of the train, discharging their rifles and revolvers with the intention of intimidating the passengers.

Scarcely had Jake and Tom reached their positions on the forward car than the fusilade began, and the men detailed for the purpose, separated from the rest and, proceeding toward the platforms to which they were assigned, climbed up the steps.

As each trio reached the doors, they were to give a signal by discharging a shot, and the general fusilade was to begin, outside, and was expected to confine the passengers to the cars and prevent their endeavoring to escape through the windows.

The desperadoes reached the platforms of their respective coaches, and the flash from the leader's heavy "Colt" was followed by a dull report which sounded sullenly on the still air of the prairie.

Nothing could be heard, before the startling crack of the revolver, but the throbbing of the injector as the water was pumped into the boiler from the tank behind.

But, as "thud" of concussion broke on the ears of the frightened passengers, the night became hideous with the yells and hurtling cries of the bandits.

The darkness became lurid with the flames which leaped from the weapons of the surrounding mob and, as the smoke arose in sulphurous clouds, the scene became one that reminded one of the pictures painted by Dante in his "Inferno."

But not one of the thieves gained access to the cars!

Scarce had the hands of those who wished to enter and murder and rob, touched the knobs of the doors when, like a bolt from heaven came the leaden hail from above.

The roofs, overhanging the platforms, protected those on the platforms immediately below from the shots of those just over them, but they were at the mercy of the men on the roof opposite.

In the full light which streamed on them from the plate glass in the car doors, there was nothing to save the would-be robbers from the fate they so richly merited.

A thud on the steps, which were soon streaming with blood, was followed by another and another, and as the bodies of the men thus hurried into eternity, fell to the ground below and rolled down the embankment, the little band of defenders gave a wild yell, and turned their attention to the men who surrounded the train.

The leaden missiles buzzed and hummed and sung on their wicked errands as though enjoying their work and in nearly every instance each bullet found its billet.

No human beings could stand such a murderous storm as was showered on the band, and with wild oaths, yells and imprecations, mingled with shrieks of pain, such as yet possessed the power fled into the chaparral which lined the track, and the glare from the furnace shed its rays only on the wounded and the dead.

Knowing that when they moved off the survivors of the fray would return to the aid of the wounded, the train, bearing the dead bodies of the engineer and his brave brother—for the body of the cremated man who had shot the former was long since consumed, moved off over the prairie, Tom being at the throttle-bar, and Jake acting as fireman.

CHAPTER XX.

TWO BLOWS AND A KNOCK-DOWN.

As the 11 P. M. train pulled into the Grand Central depot in New York the rain was falling in torrents.

But few passengers ordinarily arrive by this train and the immense station was comparatively deserted, while outside a solitary cabman, in shining rubber coat, stood by his horse, looking as uncomfortable as a half-drowned rat and much resembling one in appearance.

The train having drawn up at the platform, a scattering of the passengers took place, many of them hurrying to the front of the station to secure any vehicle which might be on hand.

The solitary cabman met with many urgent requests from various persons, and was offered much more than his ordinary fare to conduct passengers to sundry parts of the city, but in each case refused, his refusal being courteous, but firm.

"Regrets, gen'lemen; but cawn't do it. Much as my place is wuth. Boss gi'n me strict orders to wait for two gen'lemen w'ot's comin' from Sheecargo, Mister Crane an' Mister Reynolds, an' I must wait."

The latter part of this was delivered in louder tones than usual, as his keen eyes discovered our two heroes issuing from the exit, carrying their grip-sacks, and dressed in a somewhat more civilized garb than when we last saw them; a short stay in Chicago having enabled them to replenish their wardrobes.

Their names being thus loudly and publicly mentioned could but attract their attention, and as it was their wish to ride to the hotel which Jake had selected, they naturally turned to the only carriage in sight.

The fact that their arrival was expected gave instant being to those innate suspicions which

necessarily lurk in the bosom of every dweller upon the plains.

Constant watchfulness and a brain ever on the alert, are the only safeguards that a man has in that wild and lawless region.

But on this occasion it was best to grasp both horns of the dilemma, and boldly advance toward the solution of the mystery which thus abruptly and unexpectedly confronted them.

Jake, the usual spokesman, addressed the man:

"My friend, I understood you to say, an instant ago, that you awaited the arrival of Messrs. Reynolds and Crane.

"How did you happen to expect us, and who sent you here to meet the train?"

"I thought you was the gents, when I see yer a-comin' out er ther deepo," obsequiously returned the driver, touching the brim of his dripping hat, and walking to the shelter of the overhanging roof with the friends.

"Cap'n, here's a note that'll explain everythin', I guess; an' if you'll read it 'cordin' to my notion, you'll find that it's all O. K. ker-rect."

A few moments sufficed for the perusal of the short document.

It purported to be from the chief of detectives and stated that the man who had been burnt in the stage-coach accident had telegraphed details and of the departure of the two friends.

One of his men in Chicago had notified him of their arrival there and the train they had taken east; and the driver of the cab was one of his trustiest men, who had instructions to drive them to his house immediately.

The whole business looked a little "fishy," but after deliberating and consulting a moment the two comrades decided to risk it and brave any dangers that might present themselves, as they, together, had confronted many another, in the valleys and on the pine-clad uplands of the Centennial State.

So, jumping into the cab, the door of which was held wide open by "Cabby," they rattled off at a great pace, splashing through the pools of rain-water that lay in the roadway at a gait that proved that the "Chief" was as good a judge of horseflesh as he was of men.

The drive seemed almost interminable to the more restless Tom; but Jake, more familiar with New York distances, took the matter more philosophically.

He was, however, getting somewhat impatient, particularly as he did not recognize the locality through which they were now driving.

Lowering the window on his side, he was about to ask the driver where they were and how much further they had to go, when the cab drew up to the curb and stopped.

At the noise of the wheels grating against the curb, the door of the house in front of which they had stopped opened, and an officer in uniform came down the steps, his brass buttons glistening in the dim rays of a street lamp, which stood at the corner hard by.

He opened the door of the cab, and touching his cap, addressed the inmates by name, adding that the chief was in his room up-stairs, and would be pleased to see them immediately.

The two jumped out, the cab-door was slammed, and as the horse moved off under direction of the driver, they followed the officer into the house, past an angle in the hall.

As they turned, with a suddenness which was as unexpected as it was rapid, a blow descended onto the head of each of the two boys, crushing Tom to the floor and causing Jake to reel and fall against the banister, which alone supported him, for he was insensible.

They had fallen into the trap which had been set for them, and were in the hands of a foe who was as cold and pitiless as the salt sea which now surrounded the cabin where Mary Crane awaited the death prepared for her!

The villain triumphed, while the boy and girl seemed doomed to a certain death!

CHAPTER XXI.

ONE SOLITARY MATCH.

"TAKE that carrion to the top room," ordered a cold, sneering voice which, repressed as it was, still scarce concealed the exultation in its tones.

"I will attend to them when I return—and now, Job, come; we will go and see if my tender Mary has yet relented;" and turning, without a second look at the boys, he strode off, followed by his evil spirit.

His minions, following his orders, lifted the lifeless bodies of the lads, without knowing and, indeed, without much caring whether the tremendous blows that they had received, had killed them, or merely rendered them unconscious of what was passing.

Step by step they mounted flight after flight of the rickety stairs which led to the upper stories, until, finally, they reached the top floor.

Here they paused, and one of their number, taking from his pocket a huge key, unlocked a door which gave access to one of the rooms in the rear of the building, and the rest, following him into the room, flung their burdens down on a pile of gunny sacks in one corner.

A last glance, by the light of a dim lantern, showed them still breathing stertorously and oblivious to all their surroundings.

The door swung heavily on its hinges and banged with a loud clang as it was closed; the key grated harshly in the lock as the bolt shot into its socket, and then the footsteps descending the stairs sounded fainter and fainter, gradually dying away in the distance.

At length, after some little time had passed, a louder sigh than usual fell upon the air, and soon Jake rose up on his elbow, with some difficulty, for he was still dizzy from the shock, and looked around in vain endeavor to pierce the gloom.

But without success, for not even a glimmer of light showed in which direction the windows lay, if windows, indeed, there were.

He feared to move, not knowing but that he might be precipitated down some pitfall or trap prepared for them.

He therefore laid back and endeavored to collect his thoughts.

Soon all came back to him as one recalls the dim memories of a dream and all was plain.

The recollection of how he had been trapped stung him as would the barbed arrow of one of

the red warriors of the plains, and he started to his feet with a spring, his strength fully restored.

The thought of any danger that might befall him was forgotten, and his only idea was escape and revenge.

And Tom! where was he?

The heavy breathing of some one near caught his attention, and sinking to his knees, he cautiously felt his way in the direction of the sound.

Suddenly his hand encountered the face of a man, and he started back, fearful lest it might be one of his guards.

But no movement on the part of the sleeper denoted that he had been disturbed, and Jake resumed his investigations.

The first object his hand encountered established the sleeper's identity beyond question, for Tom wore in the folds of the heavy silk handkerchief which served as a scarf, a peculiarly-shaped bit of silver ore, which his pick had encountered one day while on a prospecting tour in the Gunnison region.

A whole weight was lifted from Jake's breast by this discovery, and as he could hear no further signs of human presence in the room, he concluded that they were entirely alone.

Laying his hand on Tom's shoulder, he shook him heavily, but succeeded in awakening no response.

Another fear then overcame him—a fear that the assassins, whoever they might be, had mortally wounded his friend with their sand-bag blows.

But how to discover this; how learn their whereabouts, and how aid his friend?

These were the three questions which stared the boy in the face, and seemed to him as momentous as any that had ever confronted him, even during the most perilous hours of his Western career.

The first wish was for light, and this, happily, he was not long in procuring, as he had a small box of wax tapers in his pocket, purchased for "Pure Charity's sake," from a poor girl in Chicago, he having given her fifty cents for them, and asked no change.

Truly he had cast his bread on the waters, and it had returned to him before many days.

To think was to act, and he felt in his pocket for the box, which he soon found and opened.

It contained but one match!

This was a terrible shock to him, for of what avail would the tiny flicker prove, in view of all that depended upon it?

For many minutes he hesitated, and, finally, when he essayed to strike the spark his fingers trembled so that, from very eagerness, they could scarce perform their office.

At length he nerved himself and with a bold effort struck, strongly and surely, when there was a slight snap and fizz and the little beacon, which pointed out hope, and perhaps liberty, burst into flame.

A hasty glance around, and an exclamation of joy reached his lips, but was quickly suppressed for fear of listeners.

"An exclamation of joy," for, lying almost at his very feet was a piece of candle, which, having probably grown too short for the lan-

tern in which it had been used, had been thrown out and replaced by another and longer piece.

The wick spluttered and for a moment refused to burn, when, just at the instant when the taper fell from the scorched fingers of the lad, it glimmered into a tiny flame and then burned steadily.

His first thought was of Tom.

Placing the candle carefully on the floor and in such a position that the wind could not reach it, Jake went to the window, and opening it, held his handkerchief outside until the rain had saturated it thoroughly.

He then returned to his comrade and placed the cold cloth on his forehead.

The effect was instantaneous.

Tom roused himself and regained his senses in a moment.

"Well, old boy," he said in something of his old manner, though weak, and smiling faintly, "we're in a box, ain't we? A little more water, Jake, and I'll be all right."

The clock in some distant steeple rung out two booming strokes as they talked, and, the rain having gradually ceased, the stars began to shine out and the moon from time to time peeped through the clouds.

The lads had thoroughly examined every nook and cranny of the room in which they were confined, and found no means of exit save the door, which was securely locked on the outside.

There were two windows, but the distance to the street below was frightful, they being in the sixth story.

But evidently, if they were to escape, it must be through these windows, yet the mere idea seemed madness, for how could they possibly reach the ground!

Yet these lads were as full of ideas as their veins of the bounding blood of youth, and they merely awaited that the moon should give a little more light before putting their plan into execution.

And soon the moment of action came.

The boys had passed some time in tearing into strips, and braiding some of the gunny sacks onto which they had been so rudely thrown and now had a stout cord ten or fifteen feet in length.

This cord Jake took and, wrapping it around his body, tied it firmly.

Their little morsel of candle had long since died out, the room being now lighted only by the faint rays that came into the windows from moon and stars.

And with a silent prayer Tom, standing erect on the sill of the window, grasped the inside of the frame firmly and whispered to Jake:

"Ready!"

CHAPTER XXII.

'TWIXT HEAVEN AND EARTH!

THE room in which the boys were confined was next to the roof, and it might have been practicable to remove some of the shingles and thus escape, had any tools been at hand.

At the word from Tom, Jake, climbing to the sill, leaned on his comrade's shoulder, and, for a moment, peered down into the darkness below.

The distance was terrible, and the thought that the slightest trembling of the nerves, the least weakening of the muscles, would precipitate him headlong, caused him to hesitate, and with a shudder, draw back.

But the innate bravery of the lad reasserted itself, and cautiously and carefully he began to climb up on to Tom's shoulders, the latter bracing himself with a grip so powerful, that it seemed as if his fingers would sink into the wood they grasped.

Slowly and cautiously, as one knowing that the most trifling false move would end in his being dashed beyond all semblance of humanity on the pavement below, Jack climbed the human ladder that led to freedom and liberty.

Tom stood like a rock, and, aided by the stone casing of the window, Jake at length stood erect, with one foot on each the broad shoulders of his support, clinging like a fly to the frail and slippery support in front of him.

Then, as carefully as a man in a strange place gropes his way in pitchy darkness, clinging with one hand, he raised the other high above his head, and outward where the tin gutter that caught the rain, hung above him.

He grasped it, and, with a faint exclamation of fear, a slight ejaculation of hope that the frail support might hold, he swung off into the air, grasping, as he did so, the edge with his other hand.

The metal creaked and bent with his weight, and there was an ominous crack, as if the whole construction were about to give way and hurl him into the street below.

But it held, and condensing all of his strength in his arms, he endeavored to draw himself up, but the nervous tension had been too great, and the terrible exhaustion which succeeds a severe nervous strain was upon him.

Once, twice, thrice he essayed to raise himself and each time dropped back to arm's-length, weaker after each effort.

The cruel tin cut deep into the flesh, and his fingers became drawn, and torn, and bleeding and nerveless.

It seemed but a question of seconds, now, and the boy pictured to himself, with all the quickness of an electric flash, his body whirling through the air and dashed beyond all semblance of humanity on the stones below.

Just as he was about to unclasp his fingers, having closed his eyes with a sickening feeling of horror at the cruel fate that was about to overtake him, Tom's cheery voice rung out, all thought of listeners or any other danger than the confronting one being lost in this supreme moment of life and death:

"Place your foot on my hand, Jake, and one more effort for Mary and vengeance!"

And swinging himself far out of the window, he placed his broad palm under the boy's swinging foot.

Like a galvanic shock the words roused Jake to new life and strength, and with one herculean effort, aided by a mighty push from the young giant beneath, he threw his breast over the edge of the gutter and then easily wriggled onto the roof.

It was a narrow escape, and Jake lay prone

and half-unconscious, hardly yet recovered from the frightful scene his mind's eye had pictured to him, scarce ten seconds before.

But this was no time for weakness, and Jake was soon on his feet, and prepared to act his part in the life drama in which he was so important a character.

Uncoiling the cord from his waist, he looked about him for something to which to fasten it.

Close by him rose a chimney which, though not very large in circumference, was just what he wanted.

Securely fastening one end about this, he leaned over the edge and dropped the other to Tom, who, still standing on the window-sill, awaited his further movements in silence, yet with that intense anxiety which naturally overcame him at this desperate moment.

As the end of the cord swung down, he grasped it, and without an instant's hesitation, swung off into the air and began to climb, hand over hand, the short space which separated him from the gutter.

As he drew himself up there was a crunching and a grinding sound, and looking, he saw that the sharp, jagged edges of the tin were cutting through the strands of the frail cord which held him, as the biting saw eats into the fiber of the wood.

But with one lift he reached the top, and as his right hand grasped the edge of the gutter, the cord, still grasped in his left hand, parted, and left him swinging by one arm alone.

But this was a small matter for such a powerful fellow as was Tom Reynolds, and drawing himself up, he swung onto the roof as lightly as an athlete pulls himself over the bar on which he is performing.

The building on the roof of which they stood, was on the corner, and was separated from the other warehouses on the same street, by a narrow alley, just sufficient for the passage of one wagon at a time.

This alley or passageway, used by drivers wishing to load or unload at the side-door, was from eight to ten feet wide.

On *terra firma*, and under ordinary circumstances, this would not be much of a leap, yet to make it in the dark, from the roof of one six-story building to another, requires extraordinary nerve, particularly when the jump must be made under the deceitful light of the moon and stars.

Yet this was the only means of escape that presented itself, for they dared not break through the skylight, and descending the stairs, force their way out through the mob below.

For they possessed no weapons, the pistols that they had worn in the West, and which, during their journey, they had carried in their satchels, still remained in them, and were below in the hands of the men who had attacked them.

Thinking of this, Jake turned up the collar of his coat and felt underneath, and a sigh of relief escaped him as he felt the little bundle of bank-notes that he had secreted there.

And then the two prepared for the leap, which was, indeed, a veritable "Leap for Life."

The leader in this, as in all other enterprises,

Jake, stepped back a few paces, judging the distance as well as he could, and taking a few, well-measured steps on the run, jumped.

The building on the other side was a little lower than the one on which they were standing, and covered with a composite roof of gravel and tar, and on this surface the boy landed as lightly and as softly as if it had been covered with the green sward of his western prairies.

But not so Tom.

Hurling himself through the air as if flung from a catapult, he shot onto the roof, "all of a heap," and plowing up the gravel with nose, hands and knees, looked, as Jake put it, "like a gravel-pit struck by a cyclone."

This little incident brought out a hearty laugh, and as Tom gathered himself together, the two boys were in better spirits than they had been since they had reached the city the evening before.

The long row of buildings now stretched an unbroken expanse of roofs before them and they hurried along, looking for some means of reaching the ground.

This was soon found in the shaft of an iron fire-escape, consisting of a series of balconies and ladders, and again using the cord, or what was left of it, they succeeded in reaching the upper balcony, in descending the ladders, in arriving at the wet sidewalk and proceeding up the street without further incident.

Hurrying along, Jake noting the name of the street on a lamp, for future reference, they were soon cheered by the sight of an all-night restaurant, where they were soon seated before a substantial meal, being well-nigh famished, talking over their adventures in a low tone and laying their plans for the morrow.

CHAPTER XXIII.

AN IMPORTANT CAPTURE.

ON the day following these events, three persons were seated in a small office in one of the buildings on lower Broadway, in a deep and earnest conversation.

They were the two boys, who, entirely restored by a hearty meal and long sleep, showed but few traces of the narrow escapes they had recently had.

The third was a man well on in the forties, who would be remarked wherever he went, so commanding was his aspect, so keen his eye, so magnificently developed his figure.

The mysterious document which had fallen into Jake's hands, had some time before been carefully examined and now one of the chief's best men was down among the shipping, looking for a clew to the mysterious "Sand Lake."

The word "spile" in the cryptogram led the chief to infer that reference was had to some point along the sea-shore, but search the map as they would, no such place as "Sand Lake" could be discovered.

Suddenly the detective sprang to his feet with an exclamation which sounded very much like a suppressed oath.

"What a fool I am!" he cried. "Here we are wasting precious time, while we might be acting."

"If, as I believe, this 'Sand Lake' is a small village somewhere in the vicinity, the Post-Office Guide will tell its whereabouts."

And grasping the book he turned over the leaves so rapidly that there seemed danger of tearing them from the binding.

In a moment he had found it and located the place on the map, although it was not given on the chart, the hamlet having sprung into existence very lately, or not being thought worthy of mention.

But what they had discovered was sufficient, and the three, seizing their hats, started down the stairs, three at a time, the Chief appearing as eager as the boys in his haste.

Tom, the awkward, flew out of the door like a tornado, and collided, as he reached the sidewalk, with a seafaring man, whom, bulky as he was, he nearly knocked off his feet.

At sight of him the Chief stopped short, and called to the two boys to wait; but it was only with great difficulty that he could persuade them to do so.

Grumbling at what they thought unnecessary delay, the boys remounted the stairs and entered the private office.

The door being locked the sailor removed his cap, and with it his wig, when the two lads stood open-mouth with astonishment.

Could this rough-looking sailor be the same elegant, refined, stylish-looking gentleman whom they had met that morning, and who had been detailed to visit the shipping and obtain the desired information?

Yet it was and his news was most important; for they learned the surroundings of the place "two miles south from Sand Lake," and that it was inaccessible from the land side.

And further, they learned that this "house on stilts," as it was called by the oystermen and fishermen, bore no savory reputation, and that anything that transpired there must necessarily be of a dark and bloody nature.

The Chief just then recalled an important engagement that would prevent his joining the expedition, but desired his subordinate to attend the boys and place himself entirely under their direction, while acting as their guide.

Then arming Jake and Tom from a perfect arsenal of weapons, which was contained in an adjoining room, he gave each a hearty shake of the hand and bade them "God-speed."

Arrived at the train which was to bear them to the south shore of Long Island, they were quickly aboard, bound for a station where they could procure boats and sail to the "Wreckers' Hut," as it was sometimes called.

The time dragged heavily, yet they at length arrived, and hurrying to the wharf, succeeded, with the aid of the detective, who seemed a veritable tar, so fluently did he speak the slang of the sea, in hiring a sloop which, if she was not very pretty, gave promise of speed.

In the language of her skipper:

"She's as humly as an old shoe; but she can go!"

But the breeze—the breeze! Would the wind never spring up and enable them to get to this accursed spot where the detective, in the conversation of the morning, had said that the girl must be confined?

At length a line on the water far in the southwest showed that wind was coming, and soon the sail was up, the jib hoisted, and as the wind caught the canvas, the Emma keeled gently over and fell off on her course, due east.

The few miles that lay between Blankport and the cabin where King Cole was wont to hide his villainies were half traversed, when, lying in an inlet, was seen a trim-built yacht, of small size, and capable of being managed by two men.

"Purty smart sloop," remarked the skipper. "Belongs to Mr. Cole Crane of New Yor—"

"What!" almost shrieked Jake, while he and Tom sprung to their feet, the detective being below.

"Run alongside, or, rather, heave-to. I've a word to say to that gentleman; come, Tom."

And as the boat's head came around into the wind and, her jib being let go with a run, she lay, with her sails fluttering, the boys jumped into the dinky which towed astern.

There was not a sign of life aboard the little vessel, and for a moment, Jake's hears failed him, as he thought that she might be deserted; but he was soon re-assured by seeing the row-boat belonging to her, float alongside.

Quietly the little boat drifted up to her side and quietly Jake sprung on deck and, a revolver in each hand, hurried to the door of the little cabin, which opened from the cock-pit, and contained two berths.

Each contained a sleeping man, and as Tom joined him, the lad leaped like the cougar on its prey, upon the occupant of the starboard bunk.

In a moment the struggle was over and the two men lay helpless under Tom's revolvers, while Jake, returning with some ropes he had picked up on deck, securely bound them until they resembled logs more than men.

Leaving Tom on board, Jake rowed back to the Emma, and, informing the skipper that he had met friends on board the "Crest," as the yacht was called, dismissed him with a handsome fee and bade him return to Blankport, assuring the detective that he would see him either that evening or the following day at the main office.

And returning to the "Crest," he and Tom got the sails up, and as the "Ella" beat her way against the wind to her haven, the little yacht flew, with a favoring breeze, toward the "House on Stilts."

CHAPTER XXIV.

RESCUED!

JAKE and Tom paid not the slightest attention to the two men who were groaning and cursing in the cabin; but while the former managed the helm the latter kept a sharp lookout ahead with the jib-halliards in readiness to let go at a moment's notice.

The evening was coming down and through the twilight objects on shore loomed indistinct and half-seen, as one sees a ship sailing by in a heavy fog.

Suddenly, gloomy and weird, raising itself aloft like some gaunt skeleton through the dank mist which was rising from the marshes as the cold sea came in contact with the warmer land.

loomed the outlines of a building which seemed to be the one of which they were in search, and at Tom's hail, the boat was brought up and the anchor dropped.

Jake had skirted as near the shore as he dared and had run into every bay that he came to, and now the "Crest" lay rocking on the smooth waters of a little harbor, the mysterious mansion lying a quarter of a mile or so inland.

The fact that Cole Crane and his companion were in the vicinity, confirmed Jake's belief that his sister was confined in the house, so after once more carefully examining the ropes which bound their prisoners, the lads again leaped into the row-boat and pushed off, Tom handling the oars.

Urged by his powerful strokes the little craft fairly sprung through the water, while Jake leaned far over the bow, peering eagerly at the building for some signs of life or human presence.

But what was this that he saw glimmering through the darkness that seemed like some ghostly inhabitant of the dwelling, who, standing on the water, apparently, awaited the coming of the visitors?

Suddenly, as the mist for a moment lifted and spread, he saw, in all its cruel nakedness, the horrid crime that had been perpetrated.

It was yet too far to the house to distinguish the features of the figure, yet his heart and his fears told him that it was his sister.

At the sight he for the moment became a raving maniac, and had Cole Crane been just then under the boy's hands, the latter would have spared a second to beat the life out of the cur, e'en though his sister was perishing before his eyes.

"Oh, God, Tom," he groaned, in a hoarse, strained voice, that was so unnatural that Reynolds was startled beyond measure.

"Pull, for Christ's sake, pull, and save my sister!"

The broad chest heaved, the veins in his temples stood out like whip-cords, and as Tom threw his weight onto the ashen sculls, the boat leaped out of the water and sprung forward like a tornado.

Another stroke, and then another, and at the third the oar in his right hand broke short off at the thole-pin, while Tom fell back with a cry of despair.

Yet those three mighty strokes had done their work, and as the oar snapped, Jake, standing in the bow, leaped into the water, and, half-walking, half-swimming, knife in hand, reached his sister's side, cut the thongs that bound her, and lifted her high in the air, just as a tiny wave came lapping up against her fresh young lips.

Three seconds more and they would have been too late!

In a moment Tom was by Jake's side, the latter standing shoulder-deep in the water, and the young girl was carefully laid in the stern-sheets, wrapped in Tom's coat, where she lay, half-unconscious.

As the strong young arms of her brother had lifted her far beyond the reach of the clutching ocean, she had half-opened her eyes and recognizing her brother, had closed them again, while a look of ineffable content stole over her face,

as she realized that she was in his arms.

There was a spare oar in the boat, and the "Crest" was soon reached, the girl lifted on board, and, the two men being yanked out with as little ceremony as if they had been chunks of wood, Mary was placed in the cabin, and a little fictitious strength being given her by a mouthful of brandy, she was able to remove her wet clothing and crawl beneath the blankets.

There, overcome by the terror and mortal peril of the past few hours, and by the long immersion in the water, she fell into a deep slumber, which was the best physic her fragile frame could receive.

For a few moments her slumbers were broken, and she started up in terror as she saw, in imagination, the engulfing waters creeping toward her; but Jake was always there, and petted and soothed her into quiet, until finally, as the stimulant she had taken began to make itself felt, and the warmth of the blankets stole through her chilled frame, she slept, turning over with a sigh of content as she fully realized her safety.

Carefully arranging the fire in the little stove, that it might burn for some time, Jake, quietly closing the cabin door, rejoined Tom, who was sitting in the cock-pit, occasionally giving vent to his rage by administering a vicious kick in the ribs now of Crane now of Job.

Jake came out, stern and forbidding in aspect.

The events of the past few hours had aged him more than years of tranquil ease would have done, and he was now a Man; the boy had passed away forever.

He was more than ever fit to command and Tom was struck by the change in his friend's manner, which, however, he could but admire.

In a few words he directed Tom what to do.

The night was yet quiet save for the soft wind which was yet blowing from the southwest, but far in the horizon lay a long black cloud, which foreboded a storm before the morning.

Although there was no indication of present danger, the boys—for such still they were in years—hove the other anchor overboard to prevent any possibility of the vessel dragging.

She had by this time swung bow on to shore, showing that the tide had turned, and was now running out, and both Jake and Tom shuddered to think what the cold, glassy waters would now be leaving uncovered had they not arrived in time.

The sails having been lowered and all made snug, the two men, King Cole and Job Yarton, were lowered into the boat, and Tom and Jake pushed off from the side of the yacht, which lay gently rocking on the sheltered waters of the little bay.

And the breeze sung a lullaby as it murmured through the rigging, while Mary slept sweetly on, saved from the fangs of the wolves who would have wrought her death.

CHAPTER XXV.

RETRIBUTION.

ONCE more King Cole returned to the scene of his former deviltries, but under what different auspices from his former visits!

Then he was the "monarch of all he surveyed," and now there was "none so poor as to do him reverence."

Did he think of the oar-beats that had ticked out the seconds that beat the girl's life into eternity, as he had last rowed away?

Or did the thought strike him that these tauds of the ash against the wooden pins were marking time for his march to death!

Whatever his thoughts, he kept them to himself; and, indeed, since their capture, neither he nor Job had uttered one word, and their countenances were as impassive as if they were totally unconcerned in what was passing.

Arrived at the raised dwelling, Jake passed the painter around one of the spiles and then pushing the boat around came alongside that upright which was mentioned in the cipher writing.

After a little search he discovered a piece let into the side, which he pried out with his knife, disclosing a small cavity cut in the spile.

In this were two packages, carefully tied up in oiled-silk, and these Jake placed carefully in the bosom of his shirt.

Then turning about, he addressed Cole Crane.

"You are now about to suffer the punishment you merit, for the many crimes you have committed.

"You destroyed my mother's happiness and broke her heart by basely maligning my father—as true and faithful a husband as ever stood before altar.

"You murdered my father in the Louisiana swamps, and only withheld your fire from me because you thought that I would soon die of starvation.

"You abducted my sister, fearing lest she might some day find a protector who investigating her affairs would discover your forgeries and how you were enjoying my father's wealth, which rightfully belonged to his children.

"You caused me to believe that sister dead.

"You organized a band of stage robbers, in the West and added to your Eastern crimes by Western atrocities which surpassed them in cruelty.

"You plotted through your tool Gustin, to assassinate me, and placed his reward in one of these packages"—touching his breast—"marked with his name.

"And finally, oh, cruel crime, worthy of the most barbarous nation on earth! you exposed my sister—that fair child—to a torturing, lingering death, for what reason I know not, unless it was that she would not aid and abet you in your wicked schemes.

"And for this you shall die!

"Die as you condemned my sister to die, in the cold and clammy embrace of the sea.

"You know what to expect—prepare!"

And then the innate cowardice of the villain broke forth in cries and supplications, in prayers and entreaties.

Begging Harry, as he called Jake, to remem-

ber that he was his father's brother; begging him to shut him up in a narrow cell for life.

Begging him to take his all, but only spare him his existence, and appealing to Tom to save him.

But Jake was inexorable as fate and Tom had no sympathy for such cowardice.

And soon the shrieking man was bound to the same pile that had held Mary in its vicious embrace, with his head just high enough to receive the last waters of the incoming tide.

And with Job still lying in the bottom of the boat, the two comrades returned to the yacht, the shrieks and cries and entreaties and curses of the bound man following them fainter and more faintly, until finally they died out in the distance.

Leaving Blankport on their lee-bow, Jake stood on until he reached a harbor a few miles to the eastward, and bringing the craft skillfully up to the dock, which was now deserted, he rapped on the door and awakened his sister, who was completely restored.

The refreshing sleep had done wonders for her, yet she was too tired to ask questions, and willingly took Tom's arm to walk to the hotel near by, as Jake requested, while the latter remained on board.

As soon as Tom and Mary were beyond ear-shot, Jake, stooping, cut the cords that bound Job and bade him rise.

After a few efforts the latter, chafing his wrists and ankles to restore the interrupted circulation, stood up, and in a gruff and uncompromising voice growled:

"Well?"

"You heard what I said to Crane, and saw the punishment I meted out to him, and probably expected the same fate.

"In sparing you, I had an object.

"Blood is thicker than water, and I cannot punish my own uncle as I would a stranger, no matter what his crimes.

"I have so timed things that you can easily reach and release him; he has had his lesson by this time.

"Take the Crest and do so; but say to him that within a week he must leave America, never to return, or he will be arrested and tried for murder, and there are plenty of proofs that will convict him.

"I know that he has ample means for you both; if it will do him any good to know it, I, for my sister and myself, forgive him.

"As for you—well, you are his tool, and not entirely responsible.

"Go!"

And leaping ashore, Jake disappeared in the direction of the hotel, having cast off the bow-line, and allowed the sloop to pay off before the wind.

Beating up bravely against the wind, which freshened every moment, the little "Crest" staggered steadily on and at just about half-flood tide arrived opposite the "House on Stilts."

The little bay was sheltered from the wind and waves in every direction except due south and from that quarter the gale was blowing with tremendous violence, sending the waves rolling high on shore and making their influence

felt far up the inlet where King Cole was fastened to the pile.

It was with the utmost difficulty that Job got the "Crest" head to the wind and then, leaping forward, he let go his anchor and let go all the halliards with a run.

Then, faithful to his master, he leaped into the little boat which rocked dangerously, and set out to the rescue of King Cole.

As he came in view of the latter the sight was a pitiful one, for the salt spray came singing on the wings of the wind, stinging his face like the lash of a thousand whips, while his mouth, his eyes, his nostrils were burning and scorching beneath the briny shower.

Half unconscious as he was he would have fallen but for the bonds which supported him.

As Job came to him and, leaning over, cut these cords, Crane dropped like a dead man into his arms and lay across the gunwale of the boat an inert mass.

And as the little craft swung further under the shelter of the building there was a lull in the storm, and then, yelling and screeching with a thousand-fold force the tornado burst, and striking the edifice, carried it to the water as if it had been built of cards.

Beneath the jagged and mangling timbers the two companions in evil were crushed and ground beyond all human semblance, and the waters rising high, swept away every vestige of habitation from the spot—of the "Crest," not a trace was to be seen.

King Cole had expiated his crimes at last!

EPILOGUE.

ON returning to the city, the lads found that the house where they had been confined had been raided, and all of the inmates captured.

No. 666 Sixth avenue had also been visited, but nothing of importance found there; it being Crane's private apartment, where he acted the gentleman of means.

The papers found by Jake in the pile proved beyond question the right of himself and his sister to the vast inheritance left by their father, and which Cole Crane had so long enjoyed.

Of the latter they never heard a word, so that Jake, or rather Harry Crane, as he must now be called, is to this day ignorant of his fate; which is just as well, as he was partially instrumental in bringing it about.

Harry resigned his share of their mine to Tom, despite the latter's protests, and the latter became comparatively wealthy, and when he asked Mary the all-important question a year afterward, she did not say to him nay; but promised to become Mrs. Reynolds at no very distant day.

Bob—Brierwood—is a thriving merchant in Leadville, having been started by the two boys, and never tires of telling of his duel in the canyon.

Harry is not yet married; but rumors come from Paris of a little Californian beauty of whom he is enamored and there may be a wedding soon, in which one of the principal characters will be Harry Crane; but whom Miss Frisco insists on calling DETECTIVE JAKE.

THE END.

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